A Mercury Mystery

DIG ME LATER

By Miriam-Ann Hagen

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BY

MIRIAM-ANN HAGEN

Author of:

Plant Me Now

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CHAPTER ONE

HORTENSE CLINTON saw her guests to the door. It seemed to her that she had been seeing them to the door for the better part of an hour. The tediously prolonged good nights had keyed her to that pitch of weariness and boredom at which she began to wonder why she bothered to know people, why she troubled to ask them to her house, and, above all, why, if in her folly she must entertain, she could not contrive to invite people who would know when to go home. These friends of hers, after sitting like sticks while she'd desperately made conversation at them and desperately put from her the impulse to ask them if the cat had got their tongues, had immediately upon reaching her threshold remembered all the conversation they might have made earlier and poured it then at the fixed smile of farewell which every moment made the mouth of Hortense Clinton feel more congealed.

She shut the door after them, and as she put the chain on she felt as though she were bolting out all boredoms and all irritations. She glanced at the jewel-studded watch on her wrist. It was well past two.

"If I never see you again," she muttered as she fled to her bedroom, "it will be too soon."

Passing the open door to the living room, she carefully averted her eyes. She knew the clutter they would see in there, and she wanted to go straight to bed, to drift from this exasperating boredom into a delicious drowsiness, free from the reproach of the higgledy-piggledy chairs, the unemptied ash trays, that horrible glass on the satinwood table — the one that had the lipstick-smeared cigarette butt floating in about an inch of spent highball.

"Maud," Hortense muttered. "I shall definitely stop seeing her. The other day at lunch a half inch of coffee in the bottom of her cup and she dropped her cigarette in it. Of all the disgusting habits! I just can't bear it any more."

She went through her bedroom to her dressing room, and, switching on all the lights, not just the flatteringly shaded ones, she studied herself

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long and carefully as she turned slowly before the long mirror to consider the effect of herself from all angles. She was pleased with what she saw. During the final hour Maud's hair had unmistakably begun to straggle. Harry had gone a bit slack around the mouth, but he had been drinking more than the others. Sam had forgotten his posture and had allowed his paunch to show. Stella's mascara had run, and the fact that it came of laughing too hard had made it no prettier. Looking at her friends, Hortense had seen them depressingly with some of their defenses down — the defenses which she knew only too well, those defenses which middle age raises not hopefully, but doggedly, against age.

Then there had been that young man, that most unsuitable young man, whom Maud had dragged in with her. Gregg Atterbury. Hortense wondered what his real name might be. He just hadn't looked like the sort of young man who could actually be called Gregg Atterbury. The name was as glossy and artificial and false as the rest of him. Maud was really old enough to know better. Surely she'd had enough experience in her time with such overpolished youths, enough experience to see that these little flurries of hers could never come to anything.

"I wish she wouldn't bring them places with her," Hortense thought grimly. "They, more than anything else, make her look old. They make us all look old."

Of all the young men Maud had had trailing after her from time to time, Hortense found this Gregg Atterbury the least attractive. The only thing that had seemed genuine about him had been his taste for whisky. He had unquestionably drunk enough of that, enough to have made him retire to the bathroom for an unconscionable time and to bring him back from there only in time to take Maud home.

Hortense remembered the feeling Maud and her young man had given her. She had fancied she could feel parenthetical lines around her frozen smile, a delicate network of wrinkles alongside her eyes. She had fought down the impulse to put her hands to her face, to feel whether the areas below her eyes were in truth as pouchy as she imagined them to be.

Her glass reassured her. There were the fine lines near her eyes, but she had to look very close to see them. They would be invisible to anyone else. Otherwise her face was smooth, and there was no pouchiness anywhere. Her hair looked well, and the new black dress suited her. She told herself that it was the right sort of black dress. It didn't have that silly femme-fatale look, and still it was not matronly. One had to be so careful with a black dress. So many of them made a woman look hopelessly Helen Hokinson. This was the right sort of black dress.

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It was ageless.

She had promised herself that she would tear her clothes off and slip into bed without even brushing her teeth, but those moments before the mirror had put new steel into her. It did involve an effort, but it was worth it. This business of slipping into bed just because the evening had been too long wouldn't do. It was that sort of self-indulgence that made Stella look as she did. If Stella would remember her skin food and her blemish cream every night she wouldn't have to pour on the mascara in the hope that people might be so preoccupied with her lovely eyes that they wouldn't even see her face.

Resolutely Hortense removed her dress. Resolutely she went about the tasks of undressing in her customarily systematic manner. None of this tearing off of clothes and diving between the sheets. It was the nightly ordeal, but it was worth the doing. There were victories to be won. She knew it now because she had looked at her friends and had seen defeat. The boredom was gone and with it the hope of drowsiness, and at her dressing table, with her unguents and her lotions and her creams, she massaged and rubbed vigorously.

By the time she had her face ready for bed, the reproach of her disordered living room had blossomed fully in her mind. Without even a regretful glance at her bed, she went out to set things to rights. Quickly the chairs were twitched back into position. Quickly the ash trays were emptied. Quickly the glasses were gathered up, even the disgusting one in which Maud's cigarette stub floated.

She moved on to the kitchen. It was almost two by the electric clock above the refrigerator. By the time she had finished scraping plates the clock showed a few minutes after two. She went to the pantry for a bottle of tomato-juice cocktail and put it in the refrigerator. She was just about to shut the refrigerator door when she noticed that the drip pan was almost full of water. It had apparently been defrosting itself, and she waited till she heard the reassuring hum of the motor. It seemed to be working. She removed the drip pan and emptied it.

She was about to turn off the kitchen light when she noticed that the maid had neglected to set the milk bottles out. Mindful of the cream on her face, the forehead band, the chin strap, she hesitated. With the thought that at two o'clock in the morning there would be no one in the service hall to see her, she thrust aside the hesitation. Gathering the milk bottles in the crook of one arm, she unbolted the kitchen door and opened it. The service hall was empty and dark. Through her open door her kitchen light threw a square of brightness across the hall

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floor. The light climbed the opposite wall as high as the doorknob on the door of the apartment of her neighbor, old Everett Kingsley.

Hortense stooped to set down the bottles. It was difficult. Her robe had a long, full skirt and, as she stooped, its folds multiplied and seemed to entangle her feet. For a long moment she squatted on her doorstep, using her free hand to control her skirt, trying to lower the bottles from the crook of her other arm to the floor without dropping and breaking them. It was at the most ticklish moment of all, when the bottles had started slipping and with a frantic pressure of her arm she was trying to keep them from slipping too fast, that she saw the lighted doorknob opposite slowly and silently turn.

She was neatly caught. If she were to rise now and go back into her kitchen and shut the door, she would have to move quickly to be out of sight before her neighbor could catch her in her bedtime face. She couldn't move quickly without dropping and breaking the bottles. She tightened her arm on them and arrested their slipping, and she made the only swift movement she could safely make. She ducked her head. There she squatted with her head down and waited, trying to create in her imagination some picture of how she might look when the door across the hall would open. Her shoulders would show and her black hair and all the voluminous folds of her skirt. She was all right so long as her neighbor didn't attempt to be chatty. She could hardly answer even a perfunctory greeting without raising her head. That worried her, and then she remembered that her black hair was crisscrossed with the fastenings of her forehead band and her chin strap. She could only hope that they might be enfolded in the waves of her hair and would not catch too much light.

She heard the door across the hall open. It opened quietly, but she was so very still that she caught even the small sound, and then with no sound at all the feet were right under her eyes gleaming in the square of light—feet in patent-leather shoes and above the shoes the cuffless black of evening trousers. The light raised a dim gleam from the silk-taped seams. The feet turned and the toe caps of the patent leather gleamed at her.

"He backed out of his door," she thought. "I could have set the bottles down and ducked inside before he would have turned and seen me."

That on turning he had seen her was obvious. The patent-leather shoes stood rooted before her eyes, and Hortense realized that she had startled the man who stood in them as much as he had startled her. The moment stretched ludicrously, and Hortense felt she must do some-

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thing. She didn't raise her head, but carefully she relaxed the pressure of her arm. She was letting the bottles slip again. In a moment they would be safely on the floor and, still in her squatting position, she could turn and scoot back into her kitchen.

"It will look completely mad," she thought, "but there's nothing else to do."

The thought of what her great swirl of skirt might do to her if she stayed that close to the floor and tried to turn and scoot she refused to face. It couldn't trip her and send her sprawling. It mustn't.

It didn't. She never put it to the test. She was still listening for the click of the first bottle as it would touch the floor when the sickening pain exploded against the back of her head just where her forehead band fastened. Pain blackened her vision, and there was a great noise, a noise she couldn't locate because absurdly it seemed to be inside her ears. The patent-leather toe caps were dazzlingly brighter, and they rushed up at her, and they were lost then in the folds of something great and dark and soft, billowing, pain-erasing folds that cushioned her away from everything. Hortense Clinton lay across the doorsill of her kitchen door as though dead, and her empty milk bottles lay toppled beside her.

The milkman thought she was dead. He told his story many times before the police were through with him, and each time he told it he put that in. He had been certain she was dead. He hadn't touched her, but to make certain he had brought his ear down close to her back, close enough to hear her heartbeat, and after that he had wasted no time. He had stepped over her, gone into her apartment, and telephoned for help. Then he had gone back out to the kitchen to see what he could do for her. There didn't seem to be much that he could do. He knew nothing of first aid, nothing beyond vaguely remembering that he had heard somewhere that when a person had been injured and you didn't know how or to what extent, it was most unwise to move that injured person until a doctor came.

So he couldn't move her, and it seemed absurd to just stand there and do nothing. He looked about the hall, trying to figure out what might have happened to her. It was then that he noticed the open door to the little fuse box in the hall wall. That door had been left open, and she could have hit her head on it. She could have hit her head on it hard enough to knock herself out. He felt her head and found the lump at the back where the forehead band fastened, and then he was certain that it was no more than that. She had hit her head on the fuse-box

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door, and he would look very foolish when the police came and he had to explain why he had called them.

He had, however, identified himself, and now he had to wait, and if the police should be angry with him, he would just have to take it.

"It's better to be careful than sorry," he would tell them.

He planned that. It occurred to him that he might safely move Miss Clinton if there was nothing more wrong with her than a knock on the head which came from ramming into a little open door in a dark hall. He was, however, an undersized milkman, and he estimated that lifting her and carrying her to her bed would be beyond his strength. He stood pat on that one small piece of first-aid knowledge he had: You don't touch them till the doctor comes.

If the police thought he had been overcautious, they did not think it for long, certainly not long enough to get around to telling him so. He said nothing about the open fuse box, and in his story he let it stand that he had found her in the hall, sprawled among the milk bottles with the hall light blazing down on her, and that he had thought she was dead.

An ambulance surgeon brought her around. At least he brought her as far as the half-consciousness of shock. Even in that half-consciousness, however, she poured out her story. She had gone to set out her milk bottles at a few minutes after two. The door across the hall had opened. A man had come out. He had stopped a moment, and in the next moment everything had stopped.

Full consciousness came to her in a hospital bed, and with it came remembrance of details which, if not more disquieting, were certainly more embarrassing. She raised her hand to her face, fearful of what she would find there, but her fingers came away clean, not even a film of face cream. Her forehead band and her chin strap were gone. She glanced covertly at the crisply starched nurse. It would probably have been she who had removed them, she who had wiped away the cream. That meant policemen — several policemen — had seen her in her bedtime face. Hortense was appalled by the thought, but she didn't like to ask the nurse. She noticed that her watch was no longer on her wrist. She could ask about that, and, in answering, the nurse might tell her what she wanted to know.

"My watch," she said. "Might I have it? I do like to know the time."

The nurse hurried to her and took her hand. It was the usual pulse-and-respiration routine.

"Feeling better, dear?" she asked.

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"My head aches a bit," said Hortense. "Otherwise I feel quite well."

The nurse finished with her pulse and patted her hand.

"That's right," she said. "You did take a nasty bump on the head, but you're going to be fine."

"Thank you," said Hortense. "I must look a sight."

The nurse smiled at her. "You look lovely," she assured her. "There is a lump on your head, but it's under your hair and it doesn't show at all. You've had a good sleep, and your color's come back, and you look simply lovely."

Hortense returned her smile. "I can imagine," she said. "Did you see me when they brought me in?"

"I took care of you," said the nurse.

"I must have been a sight."

"Not really. Most patients come in looking a lot worse. There were smudges of dirt on your face, but you had been lying face down when they found you. I set that to rights in no time, and it's not as though there were any disfiguring black and blue marks. It's a miracle there aren't."

Hortense sighed, but it was a contented sigh. The policemen had seen her with the face cream and the forehead band and the chin strap, but she could tell herself that they would hardly have noticed. It was a matter of comparison, after all, and most people they picked up on emergency calls would look so very much worse.

"Do you feel well enough for visitors?" the nurse asked.

"What visitors?"

Hortense was quick to put the question. She knew she was going to want a mirror before she'd allow them to admit friends to see her.

The nurse winked at her. "The doctor first," she said reassuringly. "We'll see about visitors after that. It will depend on what he says."

The nurse went out and after a few moments returned with the doctor. He was a young doctor and, although his hair wanted cutting, he was not unpersonable. Hortense was amused by his manner. It was so enormously professional. Only very young doctors were as professional as that. He spoke with her a few moments and then told her she was doing fine.

"You're quite well enough to see the police," he said, "and they have been very patient about waiting for you to wake up. Suppose you see them now and get the questions over with, and then possibly we can talk about letting you go home. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I'd like it very much," said Hortense.

She had been wondering which hospital they had taken her to. It

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wasn't Doctors or New York. It was considerably shabbier than that. She thought of asking, but decided it would be better not. She wasn't certain she wanted to know, and the thought came to her that it might even be Bellevue or Welfare Island. In any event she was convinced that it must be a place she would like to leave as quickly as possible.

The police came in, and they were most polite and gentle with her. They asked if she would mind telling them again what had happened in as exact detail as she could remember it. She told them, and under the circumstances she was very good about detail. She gave it to them exactly as she remembered it, and where she fudged a bit was only on the one detail, that mattered to no one but herself. They did ask several questions that dug toward that one detail, but Hortense was satisfied that she was telling them everything that they really needed to know.

She told them how the door opened and the man came out. She explained that she knew it was a man because of the silk-taped evening trousers and the patent-leather shoes, clearly a man's shoes. They were disappointed that she had seen no more of the man than that, and they tried to coax her into saying she had seen more, but she was careful about that, careful and quite truthful, except on the one point that she let them believe that it had all happened so fast that she hadn't had time to raise her head for a look at the man's face. There was no need for them to know that she had been completely preoccupied with not letting him catch a glimpse of her face.

They gave up on that and began questioning her about the time. On that she didn't even have to be careful. It had been a few minutes after two, not even five minutes after.

"You'd looked at your watch?" the police asked.

"Yes," said Hortense. "It was right here on my wrist." She extended her arm.

The policemen looked at her bare wrist.

"They've probably put it in the safe or wherever they put valuables here," Hortense went on.

"You're certain you had it on when you put the milk bottles out?"

"I know I had it on."

"Can you describe the watch, Miss Clinton?"

Hortense described the watch, and as they noted down the description they didn't have to tell her. She recognized now that the nurse had been careful not to answer when she had asked for her watch. It had been stolen. She might have known it. It was the only thing of value she hadn't taken off and left on her dressing table. She had no special attachment to

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the watch, and it was insured. Her mind jumped to the rings and the bracelet she had taken off. She had left them on the table in her dressing room. Insurance didn't cover her feeling about them.

"It's been stolen?" she asked.

"It wasn't on your arm when you were brought here."

"My other jewelry? That was on the table in my dressing room."

"There was jewelry on the table, Miss Clinton. We have a list."

Hortense listened carefully to the list and relaxed. It was all there. The thief had knocked her on the head and had snatched the watch from her wrist, but he hadn't had time to go into her apartment.

"Then that's what he was doing next door," she said. "It was robbery. I guess I was lucky, losing no more than my watch."

"Your neighbor lost considerably more," the detective, who had been doing most of the questioning, told her gravely. "You knew him?"

"Everett Kingsley?" Hortense murmured. "I knew him to speak to."

She had slipped into the past tense, automatically echoing the detective, but even as she said it a chill touched her.

"You asked if I knew him?" she said quickly. "Not if I know him. Has something happened to Mr. Kingsley?"

The detective nodded. "After you told us your story this morning, Miss Clinton," he said, "we naturally tried first thing to check with Mr. Kingsley. You had seen this man come out of his apartment. We got no answer at his door, and we went in. Everything points to burglary. The place had been ransacked. We found Mr. Kingsley in his bed. He had been murdered."

Hortense gasped. It was only when the young doctor leaped toward her and waved the police away that she realized she was pressing the back of her hand tight against her mouth and was biting her knuckles. The young doctor looked so troubled that she made a supreme effort. She took her hand away from her mouth and she didn't scream. She even managed a reassuring little nod.

The doctor bundled the police out of there, and after they had gone he sat with her a few minutes. He wanted to give her a sedative, but she convinced him that she didn't need one. She didn't want to sleep. She wanted to go home. The police list of jewelry had been reassuring, but the thought had been planted in her mind, and she knew that she wouldn't rest—not even with a sedative—till she had been home and had looked about for herself.

She tried to explain it to the doctor.

"It's not that I am so mad about possessions, Doctor," she said. "It's

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the awful feeling of insecurity. I suppose that's a completely feminine feeling, but I want to go home and see for myself just where everything is and how everything is."

The doctor was sympathetic. He agreed that there was no valid reason why she couldn't be discharged from the hospital, and he sent the nurse back in to her. With the nurse she discussed her need for clothes. She could hardly leave the hospital as she had come, in a nightdress and a dressing gown. She would have to telephone her maid. The girl came in by the day and would be in the apartment now. She gave the nurse the number and the list of what she would need. She was to tell the maid that Miss Clinton wanted her things brought to the hospital right away.

It was after the nurse had made the call that Hortense learned from the police that leaving the hospital did not mean she would be going home alone. Detectives would be going with her. The maid brought her the necessary clothes, and the nurse helped her dress. She even did Hortense's hair for her. Her head was still painful, and the nurse had a light and gentle touch.

It was all most bracing — dressing, seeing herself in the mirror, where she looked none the worse for her shocking experience, assuring the detectives that she was quite steady enough to walk, listening to their praises of her courage and her stamina. By the time they drew up to the house Hortense was feeling gay, as gay as a woman decently could feel, when she passed the open door of Everett Kingsley's apartment and knew that the police were busy inside and that the night before in that very apartment her next-door neighbor had been strangled in his bed. The feeling of gaiety lasted only till there came on her the thought that she had seen the man who strangled him. She had seen his feet, at least, and it had been his hand that struck her down. It had been his hand that had stripped the jeweled watch from her wrist. That hand might just as well have closed about her throat. Hortense swallowed hard and tried not to think about it.

The detectives went with her to her dressing room. She checked the jewelry and found it all there. Then she checked for other valuables. Nothing had been touched. Nothing was missing. They urged her to look further, however, to make a thorough search for her watch.

"Isn't there some other place you might have put it?" they asked.

She was certain there was no other place. She was certain that she had worn it out to the kitchen and that it had been on her arm when she had gone to the kitchen door, but to satisfy them she searched. She searched thoroughly and, as she expected, she found no watch.

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It was a disappointment to the detectives. She could see that, but the feeling of well-being that had carried her home from the hospital was fading rapidly, and by the time she had looked in all the conceivable places, with her maid and the detectives helping her look, she was simply tired — too tired for any curiosity on the point which might have made her curious, the question of why they should be so reluctant to accept the fact of the loss of her watch. It was, after all, a minor item of thievery to cause them such evident concern, a concern which contrasted oddly with the aplomb with which they accepted the facts that she had been knocked on the head, that the apartment next door had been ransacked, and that in that apartment next door Everett Kingsley had been strangled in his bed. She might have asked, but she was too tired.

She was very tired when they brought the young man in to see her, and even if she had not been tired she would have found that trying and most unpleasant. It was fantastic of them to ask her to recognize this young man. Even if he should prove to be the man with whom she had had the disastrous encounter that morning in the service hall, what would there be that she might recognize? His shoes, his trouser cuffs? What she had seen of him she had seen clearly — the patent-leather shoes, the trouser bottoms — but those had been just such shoes and just such trousers as any man might wear with his dinner jacket.

Now they brought this young man to her, and he was wearing chalk-striped flannel and sturdy oxfords. He was a white-lipped young man, and he looked at her with a frightened hopefulness that was most disquieting. She wanted to do something to reassure him, something like flashing him a comforting smile, but it would have been a forced smile, and she preferred to study his shoes and his trouser cuffs. It was a good flannel. She could see that, and the shoes looked right. English, she guessed, and handmade.

She made an honest effort at remembering, but it wasn't any good. The glint of patent leather and the more subdued glint of the trouser braid. That was the full extent of what she had seen, and she could stretch it no further. She could not even say whether the patent-leather shoes had been as good a pair as these. Her eye had caught only the shine of them, and even cheap patent leather would shine. The police, she thought pettishly, were now going beyond anything sensible. They were harassing her with nonsense.

She turned away from the young man.

"It's no use, gentlemen," she said. "I saw a pair of patent-leather shoes,

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and I saw trousers from the knee down—the sort of trousers any man wears with a dinner jacket. From that I can't say I recognize this man."

They were hanging on her words, and she was disappointing them again, but now she was beyond caring. She wanted nothing but that they should be sufficiently satisfied to go away and leave her alone.

"You wouldn't say you don't recognize him?" one of the detectives pressed her.

"I wouldn't say anything," she snapped. "I didn't see a person. I saw a pair of shoes. These are not the shoes."

"Look," said the detective hopefully, "if we got him into a tuxedo and patent-leather shoes, could you say then?"

Hortense shook her head and promptly wished she hadn't. Shaking it made it ache again.

"No," she said firmly. "You'd just be playing silly games. You could show me any pair of men's patent-leather shoes and all I could say would be that they were like the ones last night. I couldn't possibly tell you more than that. I caught the glitter of patent-leather, and they were men's shoes. That's every last bit of what I can tell you."

The detective was persistent. "What about size?" he asked. "Unusually large, unusually small?"

"I'd say average," Hortense answered.

The detective looked down at the young man's feet. They were considerably smaller than his own, but his were unusually large.

"Average," he said, "like this man's?"

"Yes," said Hortense. Although she wouldn't raise her eyes above the feet she was being asked to identify, she had a feeling that the simple monosyllable had been a blow to the young man and that he had stiffened under it. "Yes," she repeated hastily, "like this man's or like most men's. You could go out on the street and within ten minutes bring me a hundred men, and I'd look at their feet and have to say yes, about that size."

"Sure, Miss Clinton," said the detective. "Sure. We don't expect you to say it was this man's feet you saw. That would be asking too much. We just want you to tell us if it could have been this man's feet, that the ones you saw weren't so much bigger or smaller or anything that you'd know they couldn't have been his or even that you'd think maybe they couldn't be his."

They worked at it, trying to pin her down to some sort of statement, but Hortense refused to say more than what she could say with certainty, until finally, in a burst of frankness, they told her exactly what they wanted

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of her, and to that she had to give them the answer that satisfied them. It amounted to wanting from her the assurance that if they should, through other leads, prove that this young man was the one who had come out of the apartment next door while she was setting out the milk bottles they could be confident that she would not upset their proof by testifying that it could not have been this young man, that there was some peculiarity in what she had seen that would rule this young man out. Reluctantly she gave them that assurance. It seemed to her that she was saying little enough, but with the young man standing right there before her, even that seemed a brutally cruel thing to say. He made it no easier.

"Presumed to be innocent," he said bitterly, "until proven guilty."

She forced herself to raise her eyes and look at him. He was sweating.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You're sorry," he muttered. "You tell them that if they manage to pin this on me you won't do anything to upset their game, and you tell me you're sorry."

"I am sorry," Hortense repeated. "I said it could have been you or any one of millions of other men. I can't say more than that either way."

"Thanks," said the young man. "Thanks for nothing."

The detectives thanked her less equivocally, and they took the young man away. As the door shut behind them she discovered that her knees were shaking and she wanted to cry. Sternly she reminded herself that she must not cry; crying made her look a sight, and the way she felt she could imagine that she looked a sight already without making matters worse with crying. She promised herself that she would go lie down instead. She might even take a bromide, she thought. They had offered her a sedative at the hospital that she hadn't taken, and now she could certainly allow herself a bromide. The maid hovered and wanted to help her out of her things, but it was obvious that the maid would want to chatter. Just then Hortense could take no chatter. She suggested that she might like a cup of tea. The maid bustled off to brew it, and Hortense kicked off her shoes and lay down across her bed. She promised herself that when the girl brought the tea she would complain of headache and say she thought she might sleep. She would have the girl draw the curtains and she would shut her eyes. She could imagine the girl as she would tiptoe out and shut the bedroom door quietly after her, and with the picture she felt the tension go out of her muscles and something that might have been a smile of peaceful contentment creep along her lips.

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Quickly the contentment left her. It fled with her hard-won moment of peace, since that peace was shattered by the girl's screaming flight through the apartment. The first scream jerked Hortense erect. That one had come from the kitchen, and it was quickly followed by others as the girl came running toward her. She went to the door.

The girl, panting with agitation, pushed past her into the bedroom. Only then, when she had Hortense between her and whatever it had been that had frightened her, did she stop. She did go on screaming, but now the screaming became relatively coherent.

"Miss Clinton," the girl sobbed, "get those detectives back quick! He's been here again!"

Hortense fixed her with a stern gaze.

"I don't care who's been here," she said firmly. "I won't have those horrible men back in here if I die for it."

She spoke the words without thinking, but they were the wrong words. They sent the girl into a hysterical frenzy of activity.

"Heaven forbid," she jabbered, crossing her fingers the while and knocking on wood. "Don't say that, Miss Clinton. He's come back."

"Who's come back?" Hortense asked sharply.

"The murderer!" said the girl.

"Don't be silly," Hortense snapped. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"In the kitchen," the girl wailed. "He broke a chair."

Hortense wondered if the girl had gone mad.

"There's someone out in the kitchen?" She whispered the question, and she could feel fear creep up her back, the sort of fear that made her want to glance back over her shoulder and at the same time held her rigid and afraid to look.

"He was there," the girl repeated. "He broke a chair."

Hortense seized the girl's shoulders and shook her.

"Is there anyone in the kitchen now?" she shouted. "Stop talking nonsense and answer me."

The girl wrenched herself out of Hortense's hands. Her face grew heavy with a stupid, stubborn resentment.

"No," she said. "He isn't there now, but he was there."

Hortense started for the door.

"Come along and show me," she said. It was a command.

Stubbornly the girl shook her head. "I'm not going out there. Not me."

Anger at the girl made Hortense forget her own fears. She strode out to the kitchen. There was no one there. The kitchen looked quite as it always looked, except for one wooden chair that had been drawn away

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from the kitchen table and stood crazily in front of the refrigerator. It balanced on two of its legs and the splintered remains of the other two. On the crazily canted seat was printed the dust mark of a rubber heel. It was the broad, flat heel of a man's shoe and patterned in a chevron design rather like a tire tread. The kitchen door was locked and on the chain, and except for the chair, nothing was amiss anywhere.

Hortense went back to the bedroom and questioned the girl. She found herself disproportionately angry as she tried to make the girl see that her story was unutterably silly, that a murderer would not sneak into an apartment in broad daylight, stand on a chair which collapsed under him, and then just leave the apartment. It was absurd. It was impossible. It was fantastic.

"The chair's broken, isn't it?" the girl argued.

"It is," Hortense conceded.

"It's got a man's shoe mark on it, ain't it?"

"It has."

"I didn't stand on that chair. You can't say I did."

"I haven't said you stood on a chair," Hortense flared. "I haven't even asked you whom you had in the kitchen. I'm not fussing about the broken chair. You are."

That did it. The maid quite forgot to be afraid of murderers. Loudly and at length she resented the suggestion that she might have had a caller in the kitchen. Hortense's nerves had been strained to a point where she could not have given ground before the girl had she wanted to. What she found she did want to do was dismiss the girl. The girl beat her to it. She quit.

Hortense went to bed without her cup of tea.

CHAPTER TWO

It wasn't flight, although it might have seemed much like it. It started that evening with the maid. In the morning Hortense made her own breakfast, washed up the breakfast dishes, made up her own bed. She glanced at the morning paper. The headlines blazoned an arrest in the Kingsley case. She didn't read past the headlines, because just below them was the picture, and it seemed to her that the young man's eyes looked right out of the picture at her and that they were reproachful.

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She did read the picture caption. She had been wondering about the young man's identity.

"Lawrence Everett Kingsley," it read. "Nephew of the murdered man. He quarreled violently with his uncle the night of the murder."

"Scapegrace nephew," she thought, and because the eyes in the picture reproached her for the thought, she put the paper aside.

She was going to put the whole thing from her, just as she had set the newspaper aside. Grimly purposeful, she went out to the kitchen, picked up the broken chair, and set it outside the kitchen door for the porter to cart away. Then she began making herself a list of her errands for the day. She set down the two items—"maid" and "chair."

With the list in her hand she hurried back to her room and dressed carefully. She had engaged maids before, and she knew that it was a chore for which care in dress was most important. It was little good having an interview in which one told a girl that one required perfection in the doing of one's personal laundry if so much as a single blouse ruffle were anything less than perfectly pressed. Go to the agency with so much as a loose button and you would inevitably come away with a maid who had taken the job on the assumption that for you any sort of slovenly performance would be adequate.

Her grooming took time, but the last look in her glass before she started from the apartment assured her that it had been time well spent. She was wearing her favorite suit, and her white gloves were impeccable. Gloves, if they were white enough, were so important. They commanded respect. They frightened off the undesirables. Shutting the apartment door behind her, she tried it to make certain that it was locked.

It wasn't. The knob turned in her hand, and the door opened. For a moment she stood staring at it in stupefied bewilderment, and then with a surge of anger she checked the lock. The little button that released the lock had been pushed in. She had slept the night behind an unlocked door.

"That girl," she muttered. "I am well rid of her."

Punching the button, she tested the lock again. It was working perfectly, and, leaving the door behind her, she pressed the elevator button. She wondered about her newly departed maid. She had never seemed a careless girl, but this certainly was a gross carelessness. She told herself that she must be completely just, she must consider the possibility that the lock wasn't the girl's fault, but she knew it could not be her own. She had secured the lock carefully when she had seen her guests out, and she hadn't touched the door since. On her return from the hospital

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she had given her key to one of the detectives, and he had opened the door for her, but she had seen him do it. He had just slipped the key in the lock and turned it in the perfectly ordinary way. He had been nowhere near that button that released the mechanism. It had to be the girl.

The car came up and, her every movement crisp with purpose, Hortense stepped into it and jabbed her white-gloved index finger at the main-floor button. Her mind was made up. She would be quite unequivocal with the woman at the agency. This time she would have a good maid. She wouldn't take one that didn't have the very best of references, and she was going to check every last one of the references. In the lobby she came on Mr. Garrity, the building porter, and she stopped to tell him that she had put the chair out and that she would like it taken away.

"Right away, Miss Clinton," said Mr. Garrity. "I'll go up right now, Miss Clinton. I was on my way up to your apartment anyhow. Your girl told me last night she quit you, and I been talking to Mrs. Garrity, and Mrs. Garrity she said it ain't right, that girl quitting you like that and you just home from the hospital. So I was going up to tell you that, if you'd like, Mrs. Garrity says she'd like to do for you until you get a new maid."

Hortense thanked him warmly for his interest and for Mrs. Garrity's and explained that she was even then on her way to engage a new maid. He was, however, to give Mrs. Garrity her warmest thanks for this kind offer. Hortense had a vivid memory of the few occasions on which she had seen Mrs. Garrity—a blowzy female who carried about her always her own characteristic envelope of atmosphere, the scent of boiled cabbage. She shuddered at the thought of having Mrs. Garrity to "do for her," and she hoped that the shudder was invisible.

Mr. Garrity gave no sign of having noticed it. He just went on talking.

"Could've blown me right over," he said, "when that girl said she'd quit. I'd have said she was never going to quit, not so long as there was so many cops around the house. All the time yesterday before you come home she had the front door to your apartment wide open and she kept hanging around there, and every time a cop would go in or out she'd give him the eye."

Hortense wondered if this might be the explanation of the unlocked door. She told Mr. Garrity about the lock and about the broken chair in the kitchen. Mr. Garrity considered the matter carefully and after due consideration gave his opinion.

"The chair now," he said, "that would be one of them cops. You know these girls. She must've had him out in the kitchen, and, begging your

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pardon, Miss Clinton, they'd get to fooling around. He maybe was holding her on his lap or something, and the chair went. I never seen it to fail; people have cops around, right away they have trouble with their maids, but the lock now, that's something different. She fixed that on her way out. I'll put my last dollar on that, Miss Clinton. When I saw her she was mad, but mad, and she must have fixed the lock for revenge like. You know, to get even. I remember one time we had a man living in a building where I worked, and he fired this maid of his, and you know what she did? She picked a kettle off the stove and just let it go at him. Nearly cut the ear off of him with it. That's what she did. It's the way they are."

Hortense, although she could not see that the parallel was at all close, agreed that they were indeed that way. As she left the building Mr. Garrity went along, pressing on her his felicitations on her rapid return from the hospital and exhorting her always to remember that if she should need someone to "do for her" temporarily, Mrs. Garrity would be most glad to oblige.

Warmed by this encounter with Mr. Garrity, Hortense taxied to the agency. The woman behind the desk was full of questions. She had seen newspapers, and she thought Miss Clinton was wonderful to be up and about after such a horrible experience. If it had been she, she would have been in her bed hysterical for a month. And Miss Clinton was looking so well, too.

"And he stole your watch," said the woman. "A nephew who would strangle and rob his own uncle and he nearly killed you. My husband was saying this morning that he didn't do it, that a man who had just done what he'd done to his own uncle wouldn't stop on his way out to steal a little watch, as though that isn't the silliest thing. As though a man who would do what he had done would stop at anything, and anyhow I told my husband it was no use calling it a little watch that way because the papers did say it was set with diamonds and you were one of our clients and I know you have only the nicest things."

It all came out in a single, uninterrupted flow while Hortense made little gestures of deprecation. Eventually, however, the woman did have to stop for breath, and Hortense was able to speak.

"I hope you have somebody very good for me today," she said.

The woman nodded vigorously. "I'll get you a treasure," she said. "An absolute treasure, dear."

She went into her file for Hortense's card, and while she looked it up she went on with her questions. "Was the watch insured? That

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was a blessing. And what sort of man had Mr. Kingsley been? Have you seen this nephew? The papers said his fiancée was standing by him, that she had an absolute belief in his innocence. Aren't we women the fools, though? Ah, here's your card."

She read off the name and address.

"Yes," said Hortense, "that's it."

"But you won't be living at that address any more," said the woman.

Hortense looked at her in astonishment. "Yes," she said. "But of course I will."

The woman stared. "You're going to stay there after what happened?" she gasped.

"Naturally," said Hortense. "I hadn't thought of doing anything else."

It was no more than the truth, but as she said the words she felt the chill grow around her. The girls, who had been staring at her eagerly, still stared, but there was something aloof and wary about it now. The woman behind the desk looked troubled.

"I don't know," she said. "We'll have to see what we can do, Miss Clinton."

Hortense recognized the manner. It compared with the worst of the war years, when these people would palm off on one some unconscionable sloven as though they were conferring a very special favor.

"You know what I require," she said firmly. "I won't take just any girl."

"Yes," said the woman weakly as she went over to the other side of the barrier. "I'll do my best, Miss Clinton."

Hortense watched idly while the woman went from girl to girl. She was doing her best. She did start with the most promising-looking of the lot, but she worked down the scale. Each girl she talked to gave her the same response, a firm and stubborn shake of the head. Quickly she worked all the way down to the last one. This woman might have been Mrs. Garrity, but soiled. She had on her chin a hair-sprouting mole, and Hortense could distinctly see a bit of dried egg yolk that clung to the hairs. With frozen horror she watched the agency woman bend over this creature coaxingly, but even this one refused and for the moment Hortense relaxed. The woman came back to her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Clinton," she said.

"What seems to be the matter?" Hortense asked.

"It's going to be difficult, Miss Clinton, most difficult. They're all afraid." She dropped her voice to a confidential whisper. "To tell you the truth," she said, "I do admire your courage, but that place would scare

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me to death. You won't get anyone if you stay there."

"Nonsense," Hortense snapped.

"You'll see, Miss Clinton," the woman insisted. "You had a maid. She left because she was frightened to stay, didn't she?"

"She left," Hortense answered coldly, "because I wouldn't have her any more. She wasn't in the least frightened. She was in the apartment alone yesterday, and she didn't keep the door locked. She had it ajar all day."

The woman nodded. "That's just what I mean," she said. "It's exactly what I'd do. I'd leave all the doors open if I went in there at all. I'd want someone to hear me if I screamed."

Hortense gathered up her furs. "Surely," she said witheringly, "you must have one girl who isn't an utter fool."

Sweeping out in indignation, she tried a couple of strange agencies. There the formula was slightly different. She wasn't known, and there were none of the admiring preliminaries. Everything would be reassuring and businesslike till she gave her name and address, and then promptly it would be the same. She was a pariah. No girl would work in her apartment. They did not want to be murdered over the cookstove.

In angry frustration she gave up and went home. Within a week, she told herself, the Kingsley case would be forgotten and she could engage a maid without putting up with all this nonsense. She steeled herself to it. For a week she would manage with Mrs. Garrity doing for her. It didn't seem attractive, but it did seem possible until she put her key in her lock and threw the door open on her apartment.

Already a film of dust was settling on everything. She touched her white-gloved finger to the delicately fluted lip of a Sèvres bowl. It came away smudged. She had a mental picture of Mrs. Garrity as she would dust the Sèvres, and she knew it wouldn't do. Not Mrs. Garrity. She would go to a hotel.

It was only later when that horrible new feeling had set in, the feeling that she was being watched, the feeling that she was being pursued, that she recognized that this move to the hotel might have seemed like the first step in flight. The second step came later, several days later. She had chosen one of the quieter Madison Avenue hotels, a peaceful place, comfortable and discreetly luxurious. A man from the insurance company called to see her about her watch. It was a not unpleasant interview. He brought her greetings from Duane Brewster, and she could guess that he had been told that, since she was an old friend of one of the company's vice-presidents, she was not to be treated as an ordinary policy-holder. A bustling youth from the district attorney's office went over her

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story with her, step by step, from the time her friends had left that night to the moment when she woke in the hospital. Her friends rallied around and clucked sympathetically. The more officious among them offered to help find her a new apartment. Everyone agreed that it would be madness for her to go back to her old place, and when she hotly denied that it had been fear that had driven her from it they humored her with little appeasing sounds, but they smiled knowingly.

Maud came and brought Gregg Atterbury with her. On each meeting Hortense found herself liking him less. This wasn't just one of Maud's glossy youths. This one was nasty. It had been bad enough when Maud had been the exclusive object of all those ridiculously fulsome attentions, but now the young man was turning them on Hortense, and Hortense could not for a moment deceive herself that she was merely imagining it. If she hadn't known it otherwise, she would have known it from the looks Maud gave her.

It was Maud who suggested that Hortense ought to go away.

"Whatever for?" Hortense asked. "It's September. I've just been away. I like September in New York."

"Till this blows over," said Maud.

"Nonsense," Hortense snapped.

What she was thinking she did not say. She was thinking that Maud was so much afraid of losing her horrid young man that she was eager to ship Hortense out of town.

"The Lodge," Maud persisted.

"What lodge?"

"Don't you remember Nova Scotia? That place we stopped for lunch because Bill's always telling me about it and it's so wonderful that he goes back there year after year. That would be the perfect place."

Hortense remembered the Lodge. It had been a lovely place, but she was irritated with Maud.

"I'm perfectly all right here in New York," she said.

The fancy young man counterfeited a shiver. "My nerves would be in ribbons," he said. "How can you be so brave?"

All of this was trying, but the strangers were even more trying. The hotel clerks, the boys, the maids all seemed to tip-toe around her. Their eyes, she felt, were always on her, and in her presence their voices sounded unnaturally hushed. They made her feel as though she might be the inmate of some especially select mental institution, and it was a feeling she very much disliked.

It was that feeling which, despite her annoyance, made Maud's sug-

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gestion grow on her and led to the second step of flight. Her mind kept turning to the long, low lines of the Lodge where it fronted on the beach and back among the trees the comforting glow of firelight seen through cabin windows. She saw people and heard the soft tone and crisp rhythm of their British speech, and she remembered gratefully the wonderful British reticence, that peculiarly British art of leaving a person alone, of not intruding. The thought of the Lodge grew on her.

It had been on a motor trip through Nova Scotia, the Lodge halfway up the south coast between Yarmouth and Halifax. She had been with Maud and other friends, and they had stopped for luncheon. She remembered the luncheon in complete detail — excellent food, the waitress who had been working her way through some Canadian college but who had none of the usual clumsiness of the amateur waitress. She remembered the pine-scented air and spray and the silence that was more silent since it rushed forward briefly from the woods for each recurrent interval of the surf.

They had told one another, she and her friends, that they must be certain to remember this place. So exactly the spot one would want for the convalescence from an illness, for a rest, for a retreat. Maud had been smug about having taken them there. She'd heard of it from some man she always called Bill. Bill seemed to be the only one of Maud's men Hortense had never met. She had often wondered whether there really was a Bill, or whether he might be an invention Maud used to screen the gaps between glossy youths. Thinking of Maud and her absurdities, Hortense dismissed the notion of running off to Nova Scotia as another absurdity. She tried to forget it.

She might never have gone at all, although it was much in her mind, if it hadn't been for the little episode under the hotel marquee the afternoon she had gone out to have her hair done. It began in the lobby with the bell captain bustling over to her as she stepped out of the elevator.

"Will you want a cab, Miss Clinton?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," said Hortense.

"A cab for Miss Clinton," the bell captain shouted across the hushed little lobby, and the doorman leaped through his door, blew his whistle lustily and, with the most lavishly exaggerated gestures, summoned a cab.

The bell captain meanwhile escorted Hortense to the door, but before she could step through to the street he had further noisy good offices to perform.

He shouted at the doorman again. "Miss Clinton's cab ready?"

"Cab all set for Miss Clinton," the doorman shouted back. "This way,

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Miss Clinton, please."

People passing along the avenue stopped to watch as Hortense crossed the sidewalk to her cab. She felt an utter fool, and, feeling a fool, she was angry, angry enough to consider moving to another hotel. Her second thought was a better one. Why another hotel? Why not Nova Scotia and the Lodge? All the time she was at the hairdresser's she thought about it, and the question grew more and more unanswerable. There was no reason. The Lodge would be perfect. Even though it had been Maud's idea, it would be perfect.

That was how it came about. Before she returned to her hotel she telephoned for her reservations. Two mornings later she was back at the apartment, packing and giving Mr. Garrity her Nova Scotia address. That noon she was on a Boston plane. That night she was on the Yarmouth boat. Before boarding she had picked up the usual armful of magazines, and after dinner in the bed of her stateroom she began turning over the pages of a popular news weekly. "National Affairs" was dull and "Foreign News" duller. Crime was the last thing about which she had wanted to read. Hastily she was turning the page that would take her away from "Crime" when the picture stopped her cold. She flipped the page back and studied the picture.

What she had seen in it was her hat, but even then it had not occurred to her that, if it were her hat, it would be she under it. It was with the perfectly natural feminine impulse to see who it was who also had her hat that she turned back to the picture, and with the equally natural impulse to see whether the hat looked well on this other woman—an impulse more compelling than any urge to identify the lady—she studied the picture before she glanced at the caption. It was not only her hat, and before she even thought to be angry with Robert Dudley for giving another woman the hat he had created for her, further recognition set in. Those were her martens, and that was her suit.

"I hope," she said aloud, "that isn't the way the jacket looks on me when I bend over to get into a cab."

The hope died in a gasp as her eyes traveled down to the caption:

Miss Hortense Clinton
she never raised her head . . .

Hortense glared at the picture, remembering the time she had made that loudly heralded exit from the hotel. She wondered how much the bell captain and the doorman had been paid by this rag for that

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little service of identifying her for their photographer, and, wondering about it, she bitterly regretted the tips she had given those two worthies when she had checked out of the hotel. Her own vocabulary was unequal to her indignation. She reached back into a more flavorsome language she had learned from a jive-talking young traveling companion on an earlier journey.

"The cheap creeps," she moaned. "The junky flunkies."

She could not resist the text that went with the pictures, and the story that she had resolutely avoided in the newspapers all week she now read in this breezily overcolored summary. The better part of it she found familiar enough and most of that unhappily too familiar, but there were details, and, now that she had started reading them, she did find them of some interest. There was a picture of the young man the police had brought to her, and the caption had it that his name was Lawrence E. Kingsley.

"E as in Everett," read the second line. Hortense didn't find it funny.

There was also a picture of her murdered neighbor. Hortense guessed it to be an old picture. It showed a much younger man than she had known, and the collar was of a style that had gone into obscurity with Herbert Hoover.

"Larry hoped he'd choke," she read in the caption to that picture.

Hortense returned to the text. It was luridly written, but much easier to read than any newspaper story. Fact followed fact, vividly and swiftly stated, and everywhere fact was peppered with not necessarily relevant but unmistakably piquant detail. Lawrence Kingsley drank too much. His uncle did not drink at all. Lawrence lived well. His uncle lived austerely. Lawrence was not rich. His uncle was. Lawrence was his uncle's sole heir.

Everett Kingsley, flinging his arm out in his dying struggle, had smashed the watch on his wrist against the bedpost, and the watch had stopped at 4:32 A.M. Lawrence Kingsley had an excellent alibi for 4:32 A.M. At one he had been in his uncle's apartment, and their voices had been loud in quarreling. Garrity had heard the young man tell his uncle that he hoped he'd choke. Lawrence Kingsley said he'd left his uncle's apartment before 1:30, but for the interval from 1:30 till 2:45 he had no alibi, and during that hour and a quarter a watch could have been deliberately set at 4:32 and smashed at that setting.

The story followed every angle. It went into the ransacking of the Kingsley apartment, and it explored the curious fact that, although there was ample evidence of burglary, there was nothing to indicate

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what had been taken. Trusted Kingsley employees had worked with the police. They reported that Everett Kingsley had kept large sums of money in his apartment, but no one knew how much there had been that night or even that there had been any.

The writers were obviously amused by the paradoxical situation. Everett Kingsley had carried insurance against burglary. He had been murdered and robbed, but his estate could not collect on the burglary insurance, since with all the evidence of burglary there was no one to say what had been stolen. The story went on to remark that Lawrence Kingsley, the nephew who had been arrested for his uncle's murder, would as his uncle's heir be the one who would profit from any insurance claim if such claim were possible. Neatly skirting the laws of libel, they did not go so far as to say that he could collect the insurance by telling the company what he had taken, but they stopped just short of saying it.

Hortense remembered the reproach she had seen in the young man's eyes and thought that if he had thought her unkind he must since have learned more fully what unkindness could be. Sighing, she put the thought from her and went on reading. The latter part of the story dealt with her and, as she read it, it wiped from her thoughts everything she had read before. These demons had all of it—the chin strap, the forehead band, the face cream. Who had told them? Someone at the hospital? The police? That ungrateful maid? In horrid fascination she read on. The rest of it was nothing, just her story as she had told it to the police, and there most of the emphasis was put on her stolen watch. That was characterized as "ostensibly the act of a common thief," but the writer was not concerned with that. He went on to exhibit his flair for penetrating beneath the ostensible. Did the murderer, he asked, take Miss Clinton's watch with just that purpose, to divert the police into looking for a common thief? Did he recognize the fact that the lady might recover from his blow before 4:32 or even before 2:45? Did he fear that at the moment of recovery she might consult her watch and thereby establish the fact that Everett Kingsley, despite the testimony of the watch on his own wrist, had died before 2:45 A.M.? The murderer had silenced Miss Clinton only temporarily. Having murdered once, why had he boggled at a second? Was it that he had no animus against Miss Clinton and he could not murder without animus?

Flinging the magazine from her, Hortense shuddered. She was sick with anger and horror. First this horrible sheet had held her up to ridicule and then in cold blood, almost as though it might be regrettable,

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it discussed the fact that she had not been murdered. Suddenly the little stateroom seemed to close in around her. It was too tight, too compact. It smothered her.

She rose and, gathering a robe around her, went to the window and flung it wide. The cool sea air rushed in, and when she felt it in her hair she knew that she was soaked with perspiration. With it came the sea sounds and the sound of voices. Her window opened on the promenade deck, and outside couples strolled in the bright September moonlight and chattered and laughed.

Just under her window two voices rumbled in hushed argument.

"You can talk," said one of the voices.

The other one drawled in reply. She recognized the soft furry speech of Georgia.

"So you didn't knock her off on the first try," said the Southern voice. "That doesn't have to mean you won't have a second chance at her."

The words touched the raw edge of her nerves, and with never a thought of what she was doing Hortense leaned out of her window and looked down at the two young men who sat in the shadow right below her. The shock of finding them so close — she could drop her hand a few inches and touch their thick light hair — made her gasp. Turning simultaneously, they looked up at her, and in a moment they had scrambled to their feet and they seemed to be all white teeth and scrubbed faces and merry blue eyes as they grinned at her shyly and made their apologies.

"We been disturbing you with our talk," said the Southern one.

"We never thought it was a stateroom window," said the other.

"We'll move on," said Georgia. He clapped his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Come on, Bud," he said. "Let's haul away from here and let the lady sleep."

"You didn't disturb me, really," Hortense assured them.

They grinned at her again and moved off down the deck. They were about of a height and approximately of a size, and they seemed to be dressed identically in slacks and plaid woolen lumberjack shirts. They passed under a deck light, and Hortense saw that the shirts were not identical. The plaid of one had a blue ground with brown stripes. The other had the brown ground crisscrossed in blue.

Hortense put out her light and went to bed. Later in the night she woke, and the moon was gone, and through her open window came nothing but sea sounds and the sad mooing of foghorns. She had been sleeping fitfully, and she had wakened from a nightmare in which

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a grinning young man in a brown-and-blue plaid shirt stood over her threatening her with a chair while another grinning young man in a blue-and-brown plaid shirt stood by.

"Come on, Bud," he said. "Knock her off."

The purring of that soft voice was in her ears as she woke, and she lay very still listening through a moment of terror. Were they under her window again? Had she really heard them? She forced herself out of bed, calling herself a fool who was frightened by dreams, but she went to the window and pulled down the slatted shutter and locked it. The rest of the night she listened to the foghorns.

The boat came into its landing at Yarmouth early, but Hortense, who had lain waiting for the light, had seen the dawn and had been up early. The little port wore a soft veil of fog, and Hortense was quickly remembering the town. Only a few blocks up the street from the docks would be the house with the rosewood furniture and the Victorian draperies and the gold-and-white china poodle dogs. She remembered it clearly. It was an informal sort of hotel, but there had been good hot coffee and fine home-baked bread. Hortense guessed that there would be marmalade that wouldn't be the cloyingly sweet kind, and it seemed a fine idea to breakfast in the town before it would be time for her train. She had an hour from the time she went down the gangplank, and an hour should be more than enough time for breakfast.

The little hotel she found easily, and it pleased her that it was so exactly as she had remembered it—the fantastically dormered roof, the Nottingham lace curtains at the windows. Coming to it out of the fog, she found it the very essence of cozy warmth. There was the firelight playing on the bright glaze of the white china poodle dogs. There was the aroma of fresh coffee and the even cozier aroma of freshly baked bread. There was bustle, and an almost overwhelming good cheer.

All of the bustle and most of the good cheer was being provided by a young man—very young and very pretty. The helpless gestures of his delicately tapering hands were pretty. His flute-toned voice was pretty. Even the way one little curl of his hair fell over his forehead seemed a calculated nicety of dishevelment. It was pretty, too. He fluttered toward Hortense, and he fluttered around her. He was so sorry that every last table was taken. He was so sorry to have to ask her to wait. Hortense glanced at the banjo clock that hung against the lily-patterned wallpaper.

"I have almost an hour before my train," she said. "I can wait for a table if it won't be too long."

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"But I know," wailed the young man. "That train. Just everybody wants breakfast before that train. Would you leave yourself in my hands? I'll see you have your breakfast."

Hortense left herself in his hands. It seemed to her that she had little choice. She could not go back to the boat for her coffee, since in disembarking she had already cleared the Canadian immigration officials and she didn't know that she would even be permitted back aboard after that. The idea of returning to the boat, in any event, she found dismal, and going back would take so much time that she would certainly not be able to manage breakfast before her train.

She settled herself to wait. She could see into the dining room, and it was true that every last table was occupied. Early as she had been in leaving the boat, many of her fellow passengers had been earlier. She watched them at their breakfasts, and it was with some concern that she observed that they had been only a very little earlier, that so far as she could see, not one of them had advanced into the meal beyond the orange-juice preliminaries. The young man fluttered from table to table, piping conversation as he went, and Hortense wished he wouldn't. Wherever he stopped people talked with him, and when they talked they took an intermission in their eating. She couldn't see that he was in any way expediting the freeing of a table for her breakfast.

Many minutes passed this way, more than ten of them, and Hortense grew increasingly restive. Out in the fog the thought of coffee had been pleasant. Here, within the sight and sound of the brew, it had become a gnawing necessity. She tried to catch the young man's eye, but, turn and twist as he would in his fluttering, he always seemed to be turning away from her. Finally she saw nothing for it but to pursue him into the dining room.

She did that.

"My train," she said. "I thought possibly I might have a tray in my lap out in the hall. Just orange juice, coffee, and toast would do."

He seemed horrified at this idea.

"A tray in your lap!" he exclaimed. "But you wouldn't want that. We have porridge and eggs, and you could never manage those in your lap. We shall have to do better for you than that."

"You are very kind," said Hortense, "but I don't want to miss my train."

With a flicker of his elegant white hands the young man dismissed the train.

"Lots and lots of days," he said, "it doesn't leave on time. It's been

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known to leave as much as forty minutes late." He stepped back to let a waitress pass with a porridge-laden tray. "Just look at that porridge," he urged. "You do want some of that, don't you?"

"I want a breakfast," said Hortense a touch irascibly, "almost any sort of breakfast, and I don't want to depend on my train leaving late. Can you give me something, or could you tell me if I might find some other place that's serving breakfast?"

The young man's dismay was almost hysterical. All over the dining room people stopped eating to watch him perform. There was a place, but it was all the way over at the other end of town, and they wouldn't have coffee, only tea and that too horribly black, and that wouldn't do at all. He was, furthermore, quite certain that they could give her a breakfast here because the train practically never left on schedule.

"If it does happen to leave on time this morning," he finished brightly, "we do have beds."

It was obvious that he was hopeless. Bitterly Hortense began gathering her furs about her. She worked her way back through the dining room, and now the young man followed piping at her heels. He was all regrets and self-reproaches. He died down a bit, and other voices filled the gap. There seemed to be some sort of a dispute going on, and, guessing that she might be the subject of it, Hortense was most careful not to turn and look.

"It is she, Bud," said one voice.

"You're crazy, Bud," said the other.

"I know it is," said the first.

"Looks completely different," said the other.

Hortense began hurrying. She was remembering the magazine article and the picture. It was another hat and another suit, but the furs were the same, and it would be horrid if she were to be recognized here. She'd gone away from all that. She was almost to the hall when the first voice tossed in the final argument.

"You just don't know her with her clothes on, Bud," it said.

"That," Hortense told herself, "must be someone else."

She reproved herself for what she called being obsessed with her own notoriety and paused at the front door, waiting for the fluttery young man to open it for her. Having failed her in all other respects, he might at least perform that one politeness. She was startled when not he but quite another young man darted from behind her and planted his back against the door. This was a sturdy young man with an engaging smile.

"Please don't go, ma'am," he said. "Bud and I, we have plenty of

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room for a third at our table, and it's not like we didn't know you, because we did kind of meet you last night when we disturbed you with all our hoorahing under your window. We would be honored, ma'am, if you would join us at our table and be our guest at breakfast."

The kitchen door swung open, and the aroma of hot bread made Hortense's head swim. He looked such a very nice young man in his neatly tailored gabardine suit and his snowily white shirt and the little blue bow tie figured in russety brown.

"Thank you very much," said Hortense, "if you would allow me to share your table."

With a small, boyish caper of pure pleasure he cupped his hand under her elbow and all but propelled her back into the dining room. Hortense noticed that it was a big, broad, sun-bronzed hand and that this young man seemed very strong. At the table the other one — the one he called Bud — rose to greet her. She blinked a bit. They really didn't look alike. Their noses were quite different, and the one with the Georgia accent had much the broader mouth, but they had so much the same expression, and they were so much of a size, and their hair was the same. Above all, there was the way they dressed. Another gabardine suit, another snowy-white shirt, another little bow tie, this one russety brown and patterned in blue. Hortense looked from one to the other and checked. The pattern of the ties was identical, only the difference between brown on blue and blue on brown.

"It is she, Bud," said her escort.

"One up for you, Bud," said the other.

They settled her in a chair, and as the lad with the delicate air flitted by, one Bud shot out his foot and the other Bud caught the young man as he tripped and held him firmly upright and firmly fixed at their table.

"Breakfast for the lady, on the double, Trapper," said the one with the brown tie. "Orange juice and oatmeal and a couple of eggs and some ham and lots of those hot biscuits and gallons of coffee and anything else you have that's good."

"Everything of the best, Trapper," said blue tie. "If she's kept waiting, we start breaking cups and saucers."

Hortense laughed. "That's hardly necessary," she protested. "Any sort of breakfast at all will do. Just so long as I have some coffee before it's time for that train."

The young man shook loose. "Really," he said, and retreated toward the kitchen, smoothing his ruffled feathers as he went.

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Hortense did try not to laugh, but the twitching of her lips she could not control. Her new-found friends were eating enormous breakfasts, and when the waitress brought her hers she discovered that what she had thought to be a pettish early-morning wish for coffee was actually a ravenous appetite. She ate with them and enjoyed herself hugely.

"I am Hortense Clinton," she said, "and please call me anything but ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am," said the Southern accent. "Miss Clinton, may I present Bud? His name's Jim Edwards. You can call him Jim."

He was about to introduce himself as well, but Hortense forestalled him.

"You don't have to tell me," she said. "If your name isn't Edward James, I shall always think of you as Edward James anyhow, and I shall call you Eddie."

They gave her a blank look and then looked at each other. Jim braced himself to set her right.

"Miss Clinton," he echoed, "may I present Bud? His name's Black. You call him Blackie."

"No Christian name?" Hortense asked.

"No Christian name," Blackie assured her solemnly.

"He actually has a couple, but he doesn't like them," Jim explained. "So he's Blackie Black."

"I'll call him Eddie," Hortense insisted.

Blackie sighed. "All right," he said. "It's better than Japheth. But why?"

Hortense looked hard at the ties. "It's obvious," she said. "If Bud's name is James Edwards, what could Bud's name be but Edward James?"

Following her gaze, they looked down at their neat little bows.

"Brown on blue," Hortense explained, "and blue on brown. Last night it was the shirts."

They loved it. Nothing had ever been funnier. The dining room shook with their mirth, and Hortense laughed with them. She remembered her dream of the night before, and in the face of their gaiety and laughter it seemed completely ridiculous, so ridiculous that she told them about it. As soon as she had, however, she regretted it. Their laughter, always so ready, dried up. Jim flushed crimson, and Blackie scowled. They both buried their noses in their coffee cups. The sudden silence seemed to extend itself indefinitely.

Hortense had to break it. "Do you always do it?" she asked. "Dress this way to complement each other?"

"We were army buddies," Jim explained. "The Army made us

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dress exactly alike, and we swore that once we were out we'd never dress alike again; but we both like the same clothes, so we do it this way."

Blackie erased his scowl. "Sometimes we don't," he said. "Taking showers, for instance. We have only the one shower between us. When I'm wet, Bud's dry."

That restored the laughter, and it lasted through the rest of the meal. Even when they looked at their watches and announced that they would have to run for the train they treated running halfway across Yarmouth as some spectacularly entertaining lark. Hortense protested against their buying her breakfast and she protested that they need not see her to her train. She could find her way well enough alone. With lofty disdain they ignored her protests. Blackie picked up her purse and gloves. Jim picked up her furs, and between them they swept her out of the dining room. At the front door they were stopped briefly by the woman who ran the place. Hortense had remembered this woman and missed her, but now she had emerged from the kitchen, and she was just as she had been on Hortense's earlier visit—the same laces at her throat and her wrists, the same gay watered-silk dress, the same little blue velvet ribbon in her white hair, the same bang of little white curls across her forehead.

In a whisper so loud that it took every patron in the place into her confidence, she apologized to Hortense for the delays.

"He does his best, poor lamb," she said, obviously referring to the fluttery young man. "But you must make allowances for him. You see, my dear, he's my very new husband, and it will take him time to learn the ropes."

It was, therefore, in a wave of ribald laughter that they went careening out through the fog. The two youths fell in, one on either side of Hortense, and between them they propelled her along, hardly giving her time to touch her feet to the ground. It was exhilarating and breath-taking and ridiculous. A tingling warmth came to her cheeks, and she felt tendrils of hair blow loose about her hat. She formed a picture of herself—fresh and pink of face with blowing hair and a laughing mouth. It was a picture of a girl, who might be out for a romp with these two boys. They lifted her right off her feet to boost her aboard the train, and they boasted that they had made it with seconds to spare, as many as ten of them.

Hortense dropped into the first seat and took the mirror out of her purse. She was horrified by what she saw. Her hair had blown loose. Her hat had slipped awry. Her eyes, it was true, were shining, but she was forced to concede that her nose easily outshone them.

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"I look like a drunken harridan," she thought as she hastily began her repairs. She didn't speak the thought.

"I look a fright," she said, giving voice to a censored version. "You should have told me."

"Poof," said Jim.

"We like shiny noses," said Blackie.

"I don't." Hortense paused with her powder puff in midair. "The train will be starting any second now. Shouldn't you be getting off?"

She was preparing to thank them again for their assistance, but they just laughed at her.

"After all the trouble we took to get on?" Jim asked.

"We aren't leaving you now," said Blackie.

She thought they were merely teasing, and she let it drop. The train wasn't even making any of the usual noises that are the preliminaries to departure, and it was obvious that leaping off a moving train would be nothing to her young companions. She decided that she wouldn't worry about them.

"Go away someplace for a while, then," she said, waving them off with the powder puff. "I hate being watched when I do this."

"We'll go find baggage," Jim suggested.

"What does yours look like?" Blackie asked. "And where is it?"

Hortense had quite forgotten her bags.

"Oh, would you?" she said. "The porter on the boat said he'd put them on the train for me. Gray with white leather binding, and they have my initials on them."

They nodded and were off.

"Initials," Blackie shouted. "H. C."

"As in hot cha," yelled Jim.

Hortense took off her hat and did a job on her hair. She powdered her nose. She reset her hat at the proper angle. She checked her purse for her tickets and identification. She relaxed and even shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them the fog seemed to be slipping past the car windows. A light stanchion glided silently backward, and with a flicker of fear Hortense recognized that the train had started to move. Suppose the porter had not put her bags on the train. Suppose those two smooth young men had made off with them. It wasn't much of a train, and it seemed to her that they had been gone a long time.

The conductor was coming through and punching tickets. She thought she might ask him about her luggage, but before he reached her seat Blackie and Jim were upon her. They were hauling along with them

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what might have been all the bags on the train.

"We picked up everything we found loose," they explained. "Suppose you take your pick."

They made a game of it, offering her all manner of disreputable pieces and pretending disappointment when she said they weren't hers. They thought she might want them anyhow, they said. She rejected a couple of Val-A-Paks, and they confessed that those were theirs, and finally everything was eliminated except her two pullman cases.

"My hat-and-shoe bag," she wailed, quickly trying to remember just which indispensable items she had packed in the missing bag.

There was time out while tickets were punched. The boys had none. They bought theirs from the conductor, tickets for the stop where Hortense was getting off.

"Where are you staying?" Jim asked.

"The Lodge," she said carelessly, her mind more on her missing bag than on the question.

"Then that," said Blackie, "is where we're staying too."

She started to rise. "I better go look for the other bag," she said.

They urged her back into the seat.

"Same color, same binding, same initials?" Jim asked.

"Like so," said Blackie, measuring out a hat-and-shoe case with his hands. "Shorter than these and fatter."

Hortense nodded. The boys looked at each other.

"That character," said Jim.

"I thought his name couldn't be Hubert Christenberry," said Blackie. He turned to Hortense. "We'll get it for you," he promised. "Mind if it has some blood on it?"

They picked up a couple of handfuls of bags she'd refused and started back the way they'd come. At the end of the car they collided with a man. He was carrying her missing case, but that wasn't all he was carrying. He was carrying a load of whisky, a phenomenal load for any man to have taken aboard so early in the day. The boys dumped their burdens unceremoniously into an empty seat and, falling in on either side of the man, they each took an arm and propelled him down the car aisle to Hortense. They did it very much as they had borne her along through the fog, and if she had come out of the experience looking like a drunken woman, this man went into it obviously drunk.

They stopped beside her, and the man swayed between them. With an effort he made his wavering eyes focus on Hortense. He bowed lavishly, a bow that would have overbalanced him and sent him falling on

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his face had he not been firmly in the grip of Hortense's two friends.

"Beautiful lady," he said, thrusting the case at her. "Open this for me and bring out the bottle."

"Bottle?" said Hortense.

"Whisky," said the man. "I need whisky. It's for relaxation."

"Trapper," said Blackie, "you're relaxed right now."

"We saw him with your bag," Jim explained, "and he was working on the lock. He said it was his."

"He said his name was Hubert Christenberry," said Blackie.

The man made a try at frozen dignity. "It isn't," he said. "I wouldn't have such a ridiculous name. Matter of fact, I'm Bill Blandy — Dr. William Blandy — and I'm the best damn surgeon in all the world. You know why I'm so good? It's because I relax. Take the knife out of my hand and I relax completely. I'm relaxing now. I'm the most damn relaxed surgeon in all the world, or I will be soon as the lady gets my bottle out of that bag. Somebody changed the combination on me."

"Look, Doc," said Jim, "you better go find your own bag." Out of the corner of his mouth he whispered to Hortense, "He was fussing with the combination when we saw him. Do you want to look and see if there's anything missing?"

Hortense shook her head. She had noticed that this extraordinarily relaxed man had fine, well-kept hands and that his tie, however the worse for mauling, had upon it the unmistakable Charvet stamp. She couldn't imagine a man in a Charvet tie rifling her luggage. She even wondered if he might not be what he said he was.

He heard the whisper.

"It's a lie," he shouted. Leaning down toward Hortense, he whispered a question. "How many of him is there?" he asked.

"Two," said Hortense.

He shook his head sadly. "Two," he groaned, "and both the same one."

"Their ties are different," Hortense said helpfully.

The man studied the two ties.

"Lucky you aren't color-blind," he told them severely, "or you wouldn't know which was you and which was who. You veterans?"

"Who isn't?" said Blackie.

"I'm not. Not of this war, I'm not. Me and my partner, we're veterans of the other war. Operated thirty-six hours straight behind the Somme, the two of us, and then we went to Paris and got drunk. We stayed drunk for seventy-two hours. That's the way you do it. You relax. I wish you

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could see the operation I did just before I left New York. Incision went from here to here."

With a quick, sure hand he tilted Hortense's head back and, demonstrating on her throat, he ran his finger from a point just below her ear down to the neckline of her blouse. He jabbed a finger into her.

"Artery here," he said. "I tie that up."

Hortense pulled away. She didn't like having her throat cut, even in theory.

"When we get to the Lodge," he promised, "and I've had some sleep, I'll tell you all about it."

He turned back to the boys and flung his arms around their shoulders.

"'Old soldiers never die,'" he bawled in a loud and husky baritone.

For a moment he waited, listening. Then he turned on them accusingly.

"Didn't you sing in your war?" he asked bitterly.

They sang with him. "'Old soldiers never die.'" It was deafening, and Hortense was trying to think how this man would have known she was going to the Lodge and whether it was an accident that Jim and Blackie were also going there. She felt surrounded.

CHAPTER THREE

At the Lodge even her faintest misgivings left her. Her cabin was delightful. It lay back from the road, pleasantly isolated among the pines. A footpath, softly carpeted in dry brown pine needles, gave a wide berth to the rocks where the sea broke violently and fetched up at the strip of white sand beach where the breakers followed each other ashore in orderly succession. Another such footpath — a shorter one — took her out to the road. The main house was only a short way down this road, and a slightly longer distance in the other direction took her to the lake and the boathouse. Tea was served in the boathouse, and by the time Hortense had unpacked and changed it was teatime.

With never a qualm Hortense strolled along her footpath to go to tea. She could contemplate with equanimity even the possibility of meeting Dr. Blandy again. She was ready to laugh at the suspicions that had come to plague her on the train. Dr. Blandy was all right. As though she had been wearing her fears written on her face, everyone had hastened to reassure her on that point. It had begun with the driver of the Lodge car that

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had picked them up at the railroad station. He had welcomed them all politely enough, but his greeting to the doctor had been something special. He inquired about the doctor's health and about the state of his nerves. He told him about every salmon that had been caught in the Mersey that season and every tuna that had been sighted offshore and hadn't been caught. He took the doctor up in the front seat with him, and while he drove he joined the doctor in a couple of choruses of "Old Soldiers Never Die." He had, in fact, little attention to spare for his three passengers in the back seat until the doctor had dropped off to sleep. Then, tossing disjointed comments over his shoulder, he began to talk to them.

"Sleep," he said. "That's what the poor man needs, and he'll have plenty of that at the Lodge. He'll go back to the States a new man, he will. Lives on his nerves, poor lad, doing those operations and all and never a sip while he's working. We had a lady up here a couple of seasons back. She was here all the time Dr. Blandy was doing his resting that year, and she said she wouldn't let him operate on her if she would die for it. Wouldn't trust him to be steady, the way he drank, and I told her Dr. Blandy drunk was a better doctor than anybody she could name sober and anyhow he doesn't drink any when he's doctoring. He does all his drinking up here, and that's in his resting time. Good for his nerves. Well, ma'am, you won't believe this, that lady came up here again the next year, and she was fresh after a real bad operation, and who'd done it for her?"

He paused, and when nobody made a guess he looked back over his shoulder expectantly. Hortense preferred that he look at the road.

"Dr. Blandy?" she said.

Turning his eyes back to his driving, the man nodded vigorously.

"None other," he said. "And when Dr. Blandy came up to rest that year she didn't have a word to say about his drinking. She even bought him all the whisky she was allowed on her permit." He chuckled in appreciative reminiscence. "In all the times he's been up here," he said, "he's never gotten so drunk or stayed so drunk as that time."

She had it again when she was checking in. Mrs. Evans, the proprietress, found it necessary to explain Dr. Blandy.

"I hope the poor doctor didn't disturb you, Miss Clinton," she said. "He is startling till you come to know him, but we all love him up here. You see, men who subject themselves to unusual strains require unusual relaxations, and he's never like this except when he's up here. He's really a charming man and never offensive."

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She'd had it a third time from the boy who had brought her bags to the cabin. He was a medical student, and it appeared, from the way he spoke of the doctor, that much of his studying had been devoted to famous Blandy operations.

"I've worked here three summers now," the boy told her, "and every summer he's come up here. You know, I've learned more from him than I ever have from any of the professors at McGill. He tells me all about his operations and shows me exactly how he did them."

"Doesn't he show everybody?" Hortense asked.

The question was barbed, but it missed its mark.

"That," said the boy, "is the most wonderful thing about Dr. Blandy. A man like that might make a little mystery of his techniques, but he'll show anybody. He's completely unselfish."

Unselfish had not been Hortense's word for it, but she let it pass. She had been more interested at the time in disengaging the boy's thoughts from the generous doctor. She had worked hard at changing the subject to her water bottle. She'd wanted it filled, and Herbert — he'd told her to call him Herbert — once he had recognized that she was more interested in fresh water than in Dr. Blandy, had been properly contrite and had fetched her the water very nicely.

She liked Herbert, and she liked Mrs. Evans, and for their sakes she was even prepared to like Dr. Blandy. At tea, however, she encountered Mrs. Gadsden, and she told herself that under no circumstances could she undertake to like that lady. It had begun with the tea. Mrs. Gadsden nursed her cup between her hands as though she were warming them at it. She made a great to-do of snuffling up the aromatic steam, and, fixing Hortense with a birdlike beady eye, she demanded of her that she show some enthusiasm about tea.

"Don't you like tea?" she asked. "I think a cup of tea is a glorious thing."

Hortense agreed with reservations.

Mrs. Gadsden would have none of the reservations. "I always say," she declared, "a cup of tea is entertainment to me."

Then she was quoting Stevenson on the world being full of such a number of things, and with little yelps of joy right out in the middle of the boathouse she set about being happy as kings about all of them. It was a belligerent, a challenging sort of good cheer this woman dispensed. She was a little old thing and rather wizened, but there seemed to be boundless energy locked up in each one of her ninety-odd pounds, and she put all that energy into being happy about tea. Hortense set down her cup and carefully shaped her face to an expression which she hoped might

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indicate that she had just thought of a letter she had forgotten to post. She started to rise from her chair.

She didn't rise. To her resentful astonishment she found herself pounded firmly back into the seat cushions, and this little person had somehow contrived to do it with only one hand.

"Collect your thoughts," said Mrs. Gadsden.

Hortense collected them. She recalled an occasion when a man had explained football to her. She remembered very clearly that one player was not permitted to punch another player and that when they pushed a hand with considerable force into an opponent's face or body that was not punching. It was something called "straight-arming," and the rules permitted it. Having collected these thoughts, Hortense recognized that for the first time in her life she had been straight-armed. Little Mrs. Gadsden had planted one of her tiny hands on Hortense's chest and had administered a straight-arm that was not only effective but also completely within the rules.

She was trapped. She sat quietly and drank her tea, and she and Mrs. Gadsden had what the latter called "a cozy little chat." It wasn't as bad as Hortense had feared. Nothing was required of her. Mrs. Gadsden did all the talking, and she did a more animated job of it than Hortense could ever have done. She even interrupted herself at frequent intervals, usually marking the interruptions with the interjection "Wind and water."

Hortense merely had to look decently attentive, and Mrs. Gadsden did the rest. As a matter of fact, Hortense found her part of it not at all difficult. The little woman had caught her interest. She wanted to know what wind and water might have to do with the various and sundry conversational balloons Mrs. Gadsden batted about with such merry abandon.

There was a central theme — Sodom and Gomorrah. Hortense never was quite clear on how they got into the teacup which was an entertainment to Mrs. Gadsden, but somehow they had. As nearly as she could make out, they had entered by way of the Boston-Yarmouth boat. The boat, it appeared, was Sodom and Gomorrah — both of them. There was drinking on that boat and card playing and slot machines and on the decks in the moonlight — SIN.

"I was horrified," said Mrs. Gadsden. "I fled to my cabin and locked myself away from all those dreadful people, and I gave myself a good scolding. 'Wind and water, Mary Gadsden,' I told myself. 'The pure in heart cannot be harmed. Evil doeth evil only to the defiled.' But all night I could hear their laughter through my window, and my heart bled for them."

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She stanched the bleeding to lean close to Hortense and whisper.

"Don't look now," she said, "but that man by the door. He's a terrible person. The things I could tell you about him. I had a man once, and when I got him he was more dead than alive—just skin and bones, the poor thing, and I could pick him up and carry him around in my arms. Just imagine. Well, my lady, you won't believe this, but in three months I put twenty-seven pounds on him and I had him walking. My, I was so proud."

Hortense disregarded the instructions. The man by the door was Dr. Blandy. He had a bottle tucked under his arm and a glass in his hand. She tried to imagine the rather florid and definitely big-bodied doctor reduced to skin and bones, but even so depleted, she could not picture him as of a size that Mrs. Gadsden could carry about in her arms.

"The wife didn't want him to live," Mrs. Gadsden was saying. "I hate to even speak such a thought, but it's the truth. Sometimes I almost think that man really is vile. Wind and water. That man—the one over by the door—he operated, and after all I'd done for the poor soul and the wonderful way I'd brought him along, he d-i-e-d. That man k-i-l-l-e-d him. I know it. I know it. I know it."

Hortense stole another look at Dr. Blandy. His eye met hers, and with a glad smile the old soldier weaved steadfastly toward her.

"He's coming over here," Hortense warned Mrs. Gadsden.

The little person looked over her shoulder. Her beady gaze was severe. Promptly Dr. Blandy did an about-face that would have been crisp and military had his legs been even a little less rubbery. He took a firmer hold on his bottle and glass and vanished through the door.

Mrs. Gadsden sniffed disdainfully.

"I am told he's a remarkable surgeon," Hortense ventured.

"Have you ever known good to come out of a rum bottle?" Mrs. Gadsden challenged her.

"He drinks whisky," said Hortense.

"Wind and water," said Mrs. Gadsden. "And that wife," she resumed. "After all I did for the poor soul, do you think she so much as thanked me? She did not. Not that I care, of course. Wind and water, wind and water. I just packed my things and left. 'Mary Gadsden,' I told myself, 'what difference does it make? Unused love goes back to God.'"

Hortense had finished her tea, and again she sought to rise. Again she was straight-armed back into her chair and exhorted to collect her thoughts. The talk went on, and while Hortense was collecting her thoughts Mrs. Gadsden tumbled all of hers from her lips in just the

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scattered and fragmentary state in which they came to her.

It went on for only a few minutes before the pair of large and very wet young men came capering in the door. Hortense didn't need even a moment of adjustment to recognize them in swimming trunks. The trunks identified them at first glance. One wore dark blue piped in white, and the other white piped in dark blue. She reproached herself for the gratitude she had felt on being spirited away from them upon arrival at the Lodge. Now she was ecstatically happy to see them.

They bounded to her side, shaking water from themselves as they came, and skidded to a sliding stop between her and Mrs. Gadsden.

"Hubert Christenberry said you needed us, ma'am," said Blackie. "He said you needed us bad."

"We heaved him in the lake to sober him up," said Jim. "And he got sober enough to remember he was Dr. Blandy, but even then he said you needed us right away quick. Do you?"

Hortense thought fast. "Indeed I do," she said. "I've been having trouble with that case again—simply can't get it open. Will you be a couple of lambs and come over to my cabin and open it for me?"

"What case?" Blackie asked.

Jim was quicker. "The one she had trouble with on the train, Bud," he said. "Don't you remember?" He turned to Hortense. "Lead the way, lady," he said, giving her a dripping hand as she pulled herself up out of her chair. "We can open anything. We're wonderful on combinations. Don't have to sandpaper our fingers or anything."

Blackie, however, stood solidly planted, and he barred the way.

"I may be dumb ———" he began.

"You are," said Jim, "but we won't discuss that now."

"It was only this morning," said Blackie, "and I remember very clearly."

Hortense took a chance. It would sound no more insane than "wind and water," and there was a good chance that Blackie would understand.

"Dig me later," she said, and, brushing past his wet shoulder, she grasped his arm and pulled him away from Mrs. Gadsden. She did pause long enough to cast over her shoulder at the lady what she hoped might look like an apologetic smile. Mrs. Gadsden beamed at her as she prepared to pour herself another cup of entertainment.

Between them Hortense and Jim rushed Blackie out of the boathouse.

"Dig you," said Jim when they were safely out the door. "Hep and everything."

"I'm not too hep," she hastened to explain. "I learned that from a young woman I once had traveling with me." Hortense remembered

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the travail of trying to keep abreast of the hep chatter on that trip, and she wanted no more of it.

"But I still don't dig it," Blackie complained as the boys picked up their towels and rubbed off some of the surplus lake water.

Hortense explained. "She's a maniac of some sort, and she knows Dr. Blandy," she said. "She had me cornered, and I couldn't get away. Every time I tried to get out of that chair she'd tell me to collect my thoughts and she'd straight-arm me back into it. Dr. Blandy sent you to rescue me, and you shouldn't have thrown him into the lake. He had his clothes on."

Blackie dismissed that lightly. "He loved it," he said. "It got him so sober he can have the fun of getting drunk all over again. Where did you play football?"

Hortense explained how she came to know what a straight-arm was, but Blackie stopped listening in the middle of it.

"Dig the babe!" he said. "Third window of the boathouse."

Hortense didn't turn to look. The boys fastened on her arms and hurried her off along the footpath. It was like going through the fog in Yarmouth. It was becoming a habit. As they went, however, they did explain. Blackie had spotted Mrs. Gadsden. She had been peering at them through the boathouse window.

Even after they were out of sight of the boathouse, however, they rushed Hortense along between them and swept her right into her cabin.

"Now let's see that case," said Blackie.

Hortense explained again. She'd had no trouble with the case. She had merely needed rescuing from Mrs. Gadsden.

"Better be sure," said Blackie. "Those combinations can be tricky."

Just to satisfy him to demonstrate that she was not so helpless as he seemed to think, Hortense brought out her hat-and-shoe case and worked the combination lock while they watched her. She opened the case without difficulty. Blackie was satisfied.

That first afternoon seemed to set the pattern of her days. There was breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There was tea at the boathouse. There was the quick dip into the numbing surf and the more leisurely swimming in the warmer lake. There was Mrs. Gadsden. There were the boys to rescue her from Mrs. Gadsden, although in the bits of conversation to which she was subjected before rescue would arrive she did learn that the lady was a nurse, that she had eleven grown children and forty-one grandchildren, that all five of her sons were preachers, and that she could beat every one of them at quoting chapter and verse. Hortense

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even came to understand "wind and water." Mrs. Gadsden would not take the name of the Lord in vain, but as excitable a talker as she did have to have some useful interjection, and "wind and water" served that purpose. There was Dr. Blandy and the throat operation he persisted in demonstrating on her, and again there were the boys to rescue her from him. There was the fine fire in her cabin and the roaring blaze in the main house. There were the flowers that Mrs. Evans raised in her own garden and the little nosegays she would leave in Hortense's cabin every day. There was Herbert and the fact that he never forgot that Miss Clinton liked fresh water. It was the last thing he did every night. He would bring her a bottle of fresh water.

There were the McNab sisters and their tales of the evening weddings to which they had been asked in the best houses in Nova Scotia. It did seem shocking, they said, but with the young men unable to obtain the proper morning coats these days and every suitable young man owning evening clothes, what else could people do? There was good bridge in the evenings with the Misses McNab and Mrs. Evans, bridge that was the most impregnable defense against Mrs. Gadsden, who at the sight of cards would retreat in horror to take her unused love back to God. There was the curious storage bin for bridge tables inside the big cylinder that was the core around which wound the spiral staircase to the upper floor of the main house. A simulated log, it had a great round hollow inside it and a little door near the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Evans explained that it had been built as a laundry chute and that there was another little door upstairs. It wasn't used for the laundry any more because it had never worked out. Bundles dropped through the little door upstairs to be collected below invariably split and scattered, and gathering them up again was more trouble than carrying them downstairs. Jim and Blackie discovered this hollow log the first night, and they enjoyed stealing inside it and howling. The reverberations shook the whole building.

It was all most pleasant and relaxing, and even the hazards were rather less discomfiting than would be normal expectation for a resort hotel. Hortense relaxed. She liked the place and the people. In small doses — and with the boys to rescue her, she didn't have to take them in large doses — she even liked Mrs. Gadsden and Dr. Blandy. It was a long walk into town but a pleasant one, and she took it almost every day, and there, too, she found the people kind and gracious. About the fourth day she was there she met Albert Haines, and although she pretended to be annoyed when the boys chaffed her about him, she rather enjoyed it.

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It was nothing like that, she told herself. Albert Haines was just part of the whole picture. He was a dim sort of a man with his thinning hair and his eyes quite lost behind his big sunglasses, but he was gentle and soft-spoken and enormously polite. One could relax with Albert Haines. He spoke little, and he was a good listener, and it seemed to Hortense that he among both the residents and the visitors was the only person on the peninsula other than herself who liked to walk. She would set out from the Lodge by herself, and she would enjoy her solitary walk into town. It was just the right distance, and the road in its quiet meanderings was little-traveled. On the return trip, when she would begin to be a little tired and walking would begin to pall, she appreciated having Albert Haines along. He was someone to talk to, someone to share her admiration of rocks and sea and wild flowers, someone to be with. In a less quiet milieu, in a place where she would expect something more positive from a man, Albert Haines would not have suited her at all. She told herself that only here, only for walking idly along a country road, could he seem anything more than completely ineffectual, a poor stick of a man, something limply negative in the way of personality.

It was on the second of her walks to town that she met him. She had taken some letters in with her and asked the way to the post office. The grocery boy she had asked gave her the simple directions, but while he was telling her Albert Haines came along and remarked that he was on his way to the post office and would be happy to have her walk along with him. They fell in together, and it was all quite casual and effortlessly pleasant. At the post office he asked if he couldn't post her letters for her, and she thanked him and put them in his hand.

She hadn't even known his name then. That came the next day when they again met in the village. He introduced himself, and they walked about town together, and when she had started back to the Lodge he had asked if he might walk with her part of the way. He had walked all the way, leaving her only when she turned off the road and took the footpath in to her cabin. It was the third day, when they again met in town and he again walked her all the way back to her path, that Jim and Blackie debouched from that path at the very moment when she was taking her leave of Albert Haines. They carried her off to see the salmon they had caught, and it was then that they had begun teasing her about her rather dim admirer. She had gone on through her routine day, and their chaffing had rapidly become part of the routine.

It was the next morning that the spell was broken. It was at the very

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start of the day. She had had her shower, and she was hurrying her dressing. She didn't like drawing it fine on meal hours, coming last into the dining room, keeping her waitress after the other girls had finished clearing their tables. She snatched her shoes from her closet and carried them with her to the dressing table. She was saving a fragment of time, letting her toes feel their way into her shoes while her hands and her eyes were occupied with doing her hair. The left shoe went on easily. The right one gave her trouble. Her toes came up against something hard and unyielding in the shoe. Her first thought was that it would be a pebble, but a pebble seemed impossible. She had worn these shoes a couple of days before, and she would have felt a pebble, even one not nearly so large as this one felt. There had been no pebble in the shoe when she had taken it off, and how would a pebble come in her shoe while the shoe stood in the closet? She was busy with her hair, and she just went on feeling of the object with her toes and trying to puzzle out what it might be. She decided it would have to be a button, and the thought was most irksome. A button could have come off something in the closet and fallen in the shoe. That was quite possible, and it was completely a nuisance. It meant a button that would have to be sewn back on, and Hortense hated sewing buttons.

When she had finished with her hair she bent down and picked up the shoe, upending it over her hand. As the thing fell from the shoe the morning light caught it and glitter flashed out from it. Hortense sat at the dressing table and in pure bewilderment stared at the thing in her hand. It was her watch, the watch she had worn on her wrist when she had gone to put out the milk bottles that terrible night, the watch she had not seen since then. A succession of pictures flashed before her mind—her insistence to the police, in the face of their reluctance to believe it, that her watch had been stolen, the strained patience with which she had searched for the watch, her interview with the man from the insurance company. She felt an utter fool. She had been so stubborn about the loss of this watch. It would be mortifying to admit that she had had it all the time. Slowly she finished dressing. She had set the watch down on the dressing table, and constantly her eyes strayed to it, disbelieving what they saw.

She was more than half inclined to say nothing about it, to tell no one that the watch had turned up. That would be much the easiest thing to do. It would save her so many explanations, so much embarrassment. Even as she thought of it, however, she knew that she could not keep silent. The police were looking for that watch. In one way or another

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it would have to be an item in their case against the young man they had brought to her, Everett Kingsley's nephew. Now, since it had turned out that she hadn't lost the watch at all but had merely mislaid it, she would have to tell the police. It made things exactly as they had seemed to want them that day they brought her home from the hospital. The police would have to be told.

More than that, she would have to let the insurance people know. Essentially she had entered a fraudulent claim, which was all right so long as she had done it in ignorance, but now, with the watch lying there before her on the dressing table, she was confronted with a responsibility she couldn't evade. She would write to her insurance man immediately after breakfast.

Grimly she finished dressing. Picking up the watch, she wondered where she might put it. Ordinarily before she left New York she would have placed it in her safe-deposit box at the bank along with other such jewelry. Hortense had an unalterable prejudice against diamonds worn with a tennis dress. The Lodge was no place for jewels. She thought of locking it in one of her bags, but she didn't like the idea. She had a panicky fear of mislaying it again. She had made enough of a fool of herself as it was.

She fastened it to her wrist and with a grimace of distaste watched it sparkle inappropriately against the tan softness of her cashmere sweater. There would be an office safe where valuables could be deposited. That would be the place for it.

"Better let someone else take care of it," she muttered, "if I'm such a careless idiot."

She started out of the cabin, but before she left she was irresistibly drawn back to the closet. The whole thing was too incredible. She flung open the closet door and stood awhile studying it. Her shoes were ranged in a neat row on the floor, and in the row there was the gap — the place where this pair had been standing, the place from which she had taken them to put them on. Just above that place hung her robe. She closed the closet door and left the cabin. She had forgotten all her fears of being late to breakfast, of inconveniencing her waitress. She walked slowly with her head bent, thinking hard. She had worn the shoes twice since coming to the Lodge, and that made it impossible that the watch should have been in the shoe all this time. She was certain of that, but it helped her not at all with the questions that bothered her. Where had the watch been and how had it come into her shoe?

The questions were still bothering her when she came to the main

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house and met her fellow guests as they came out of the dining room. Jim and Blackie called shame at her and accused her of oversleeping. She decided to keep the watch with her till after breakfast. She had remembered the waitress, and, pausing for nothing, she hurried into the dining room and went to her table. As she seated herself she apologized to the girl for her lateness.

She showed the girl the watch. "I just found this while I was dressing," she said. "I thought I had lost it. It threw me off completely."

The girl assured her that her lateness didn't matter. She admired the watch.

"If I had one like that and lost it," she said, "I'd be having hysterics. You never even said a word."

The girl went off to fetch her orange juice. Hortense had an uncomfortable feeling that the girl was forming a most peculiar picture of her —a picture that would make her the sort of woman who would wear diamond-studded wrist watches to the beach and would regard the loss of one as no more important than the loss of a handkerchief.

She allowed the girl to bring her oatmeal, but she vetoed eggs and kippers and kidneys and hot cakes. The least she could do would be to make a quick breakfast in the empty dining room and not keep the waitress hanging about till all hours. When the girl brought her her toast and coffee, she tried to explain.

"I lost it at home in New York," she said. "Now this morning it turned up here in my closet. It had fallen into one of my shoes."

The girl marveled. "Why, Miss Clinton," she said, "that's a miracle. Aren't you lucky?"

"It's too much of a miracle," said Hortense. "I've been trying to think how it could have happened."

The girl laughed. "It happened to me once," she said, "but it wasn't a watch. It was only a shilling. I had it on my table, and I'd taken off my shoes. I was undressing. I must have brushed the shilling off the table, and it fell into my shoe. I didn't hear it fall. I put the shoes away, and I hunted and hunted for the shilling. It wasn't until the next time I wore those shoes that I found it. As soon as I put my shoe on I felt the shilling."

Hortense shook her head. "No," she said, "it couldn't have been like that. I feel as though I were going mad."

She finished her breakfast and hunted out Mrs. Evans. The Misses McNab were with her, and they looked down their noses at the watch. Hortense felt as though everyone were looking at it and from

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it to her. She read the looks as a mingling of curiosity and disdain. She felt she had to explain that she was not really the sort of woman who made a habit of wearing diamonds to breakfast. She tried to tell them what had happened, and the more she spoke of it, the more ridiculous and impossible it seemed. Miss Catherine McNab remembered an aunt of theirs who had once caught a diamond pendant in a lace fichu and for months had thought the pendant lost until one day she brought out the fichu and there it was.

"But people don't wear lace fichus any more, Catherine," Miss Emily McNab objected. "Furthermore, Miss Clinton has worn these boots since, and the watch wasn't in them."

"And," Hortense added, "it couldn't possibly have fallen into these shoes when I undressed that night, because I had been wearing evening clothes."

Both Miss McNabs nodded eagerly. This was a field in which they were expert, even more expert than they were at bridge.

"Yes, certainly," said Miss Catherine. "One wouldn't wear walking boots with evening clothes."

"I don't wear them at all in town," said Hortense.

"Naturally not," said Miss Emily. "Americans don't."

Mrs. Evans locked the watch in the safe.

"It's uncanny," was her comment, "but I'm so happy you have it back. Such a lovely watch."

"I shall have to write the insurance company and the police," said Hortense.

The Misses McNab gasped.

"The police?" said Miss Catherine.

"How very horrid," said Miss Emily.

"I could understand it with a lace fichu," Miss Catherine murmured.

"There are lace cuffs on my dressing gown," Hortense thought aloud, "but that's impossible."

"You have the dressing gown with you?" Miss Catherine asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"Then that will be it, my dear. It doesn't have to be a fichu. It's the lace that does it. Things do catch in lace, and so very tenaciously."

"I undressed that night and I put on the dressing gown." Hortense tried to reconstruct it. "The watch could have slipped its catch then and caught in the lace, or it could have happened later when he hit me and I fell, but you'd think they would have noticed it when they undressed me at the hospital. I've had that dressing gown on countless times since

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I've been here, and I should have felt the weight of the watch in the lace even if I didn't notice it when I was packing. It's really most extraordinary, but that's the way it has to be, because the dressing gown was hanging right above the shoes, and it couldn't possibly have fallen into the shoe unless it did fall from the dressing gown."

She stopped short. The expressions of Mrs. Evans and the Misses McNab stopped her. They were looking at her, or rather, covertly, at just the edges of her, as ladies look when the occasion calls for staring at a person and manners call for a pretense that a most embarrassing admission had not been made. Hortense thought back over what she had been saying and knew she had made a slip. Despite her resolve to tell no one up here of her terrible experience, she had now told so much that she must tell the rest.

Far better to have left them with the impression that she was the sort of woman who wore diamonds to breakfast than that they should think that she was the sort of woman who in the ordinary course of events might be knocked about by men.

"That does sound dreadful, doesn't it?" she said rather fatuously. "Actually it was."

She told them the whole story and they punctuated her narrative with little exclamations of sympathy and shock. When she came to the patent-leather shoes and the evening trousers, Miss Emily McNab interrupted for a question.

"You saw nothing above the knees?" she asked.

"No," said Hortense. "Nothing. He struck me before I raised my head."

She was making no more slips. No need to tell them of the face cream and the chin strap and the forehead band.

"But you did see more than you told the police," Miss Emily declared. "You must have seen whether he was wearing a dinner jacket or a tail coat."

Hortense shook her head. "I didn't see his coat at all," she said.

"That's just it," said Miss Emily. "Then you knew he was wearing a dinner jacket. The tails of a tail coat come down below the knees."

"Not necessarily." Miss Catherine took issue with her sister. "The tails of any well-cut tail coat do come down below the knees, just below, but in the States one sees some extraordinarily cut clothes. I remember once in Toronto I saw a man from the States and he was wearing a pale green tail coat. Just fancy that. You might call it a lime green."

Hortense found this discussion more than a little irritating.

"I dare say," she said, "that in Toronto, or even in London, there

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might be some men whose evening clothes aren't well tailored."

The Misses McNab stiffened in quick distress.

"But, my dear," said Miss Emily, "our men all know how to dress. When they are quite small boys and they are going off to school, we equip them with all the proper clothes and they learn to wear their clothes. By the time they are grown men they are completely at home with their clothes and they never wear the wrong thing."

"Quite," said Hortense crisply. "But the sort of man who commits murder and robbery, who strikes a woman down and leaves her unconscious on the floor of a service hall, might be as wrong in his clothes as he is in his manners and morals. I hardly think it a matter of nationality."

Miss Catherine came over to her side.

"Miss Clinton is quite right, Emily," she said firmly. "The person would necessarily be lower class, and heaven only knows what he might have been wearing with dress trousers."

Miss Emily, however, was stubborn.

"But he killed his uncle," she argued, "and I understood from Miss Clinton that his uncle was a gentleman. The nephew is obviously a black sheep, but that doesn't mean that he would go about in a ridiculously bobtailed tail coat."

"It seems most unimportant," Hortense interposed.

"Indeed, it is," said Mrs. Evans sensibly. "You poor dear, I think it's most remarkable that you noticed and remembered as much as you did. I know if it had happened to me, I'd be in a nursing home still and too hysterical to know whether the creature wore tennis shoes or hip boots. The thing to do is to put it from your mind entirely. I can imagine the state you've been in and I think it's perfectly natural that you should have overlooked the watch. Obviously it's been caught in that lace cuff of your dressing gown all this time and you've been in no condition to notice. Just don't allow yourself to think of it, because if you make yourself remember lying on that floor for hours and hours, you'll go all to pieces. I know I would."

"I have been forgetting it," Hortense assured her. "I want to forget it. It was by no means a pleasant experience."

"It was horrible," said Mrs. Evans stoutly. "I'm surprised that you even wear the dressing gown after that. I shouldn't want anything about me that would remind me, certainly not the thing I was wearing when I lay on that floor."

Hortense went white and clutched at Mrs. Evans's arm. The ladies, shocked by her sudden pallor, helped her to a chair.

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"The watch," Hortense gasped. "It was stolen and now it has been returned. I couldn't think of wearing that dressing gown after it had been all over the floor. It went to the cleaners before I ever wore it again. I had forgotten it had been to the cleaners. You had better call the police."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hortense did not walk down to the village that day. The word spread rapidly through the Lodge and ran from cabin to cabin. Hortense Clinton had found a watch which she had thought lost and now, instead of being happy as any woman under the circumstances would properly be, she was terrified. They all took turns at trying to talk her out of her panic. Blackie and Jim were humorous about it. Dr. Blandy murmured alcoholically and learnedly about compulsive fears which might result from brain injury incurred through a blow on the head. Mrs. Gadsden went about telling everyone that New York, as well as the Boston-Yarmouth boat, was Sodom and Gomorrah but wind and water evil doeth evil only to the defiled and if Hortense would sit quietly and collect her thoughts she would be perfectly all right again. The Misses McNab told again and again the tale of the lost pendant and the lace fichu and explained that laces were treacherous that way and if the dressing gown had been to the cleaners, the watch might have been caught in almost any bit of lace. Mrs. Evans was gently concerned and very, very kind but she was also quite firm in urging Hortense just to think of it as a miracle and put it from her mind. Crime was quite unknown in this lovely countryside and it was unthinkable that any guest at the Lodge should be suspected of taking a watch or even putting one back, much less of murder or assault.

"We simply do not have that sort of person," she said. "There are events in the lives of all of us that defy any reasonable explanation. It is best to accept them as miracles."

Hortense, however, stubbornly refused the miracle. She would have to see the police. If they chose to believe in miracles, they could, but she would not sleep another night at the Lodge unless she saw the police. In that way it came about that she was driven into town that day. Mrs. Evans went with her and Herbert drove, Herbert, who ever since the first day had remembered that Miss Clinton always wanted fresh water in her room and who the last thing every evening brought to her cabin a

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filled water bottle.

Now he drove carefully, so carefully that Hortense found herself growing impatient of the car's slow pace. She kept telling herself that it was out of consideration for her that Herbert was holding the car's speed under thirty and that Mrs. Evans was being more than usually kind. She did appreciate it and she was trying to show her appreciation.

Mrs. Evans prattled of town and the shops, of good flannels and fine china, of cashmere sweaters and wool yarn; and Hortense tried to make a conversation of it but she managed little more in reply than monosyllables. Her mind was busy elsewhere, busy with what she would have to tell the police. She had come out of her first panicky fear and she had begun to reason. With reasoning there had come before her eyes the picture of the young man whom the police had brought to her, Everett Kingsley's nephew.

He was in jail down in New York, awaiting trial, and he certainly could not be both there and here. Of one thing she was certain: he could not have managed this strange return of her watch, and if he had not returned it, he could not have taken it. She made every endeavor to think carefully, systematically, and carefully she considered the possibility of a confederate. Someone who cared enough about the unfortunate young man might help him to the extent of getting that most incriminating watch off his hands, since the watch was the only tangible piece of evidence that could place him in the service hall that night.

Hortense tried to hang on to this thought. It was the least unsettling of all the thoughts that thronged her mind, and she tried to convince herself that it was not impossibly elaborate. Too many objections, however, swarmed up to plague her. If it were simply a matter of putting an incriminating piece of evidence out of his possession, who would go to so much trouble to return the watch to her? It was no good thinking that it had been almost no trouble at all for someone to slip into her cabin sometime during the day and toss the watch into her closet. There were, it was true, any number of possible and convenient times — when she went down to the beach for her icy dip in the surf, when she went over to the lake for her more leisurely swim, at mealtimes, during her walks to town, in the course of a bridge evening. She spent very little time in her cabin.

That, however, would be only the last small item in a large and elaborate undertaking, an undertaking that involved learning where she had gone from New York, following her all the way up here to this remote corner of the Nova Scotia coast, carrying that damning watch all the way, going through Canadian customs with it, and only finally depositing

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it in the closet of her cabin. So much simpler to have dropped it in the subway or tossed it in the river. Either method would have served much better a purpose that stopped with ridding oneself of the watch.

There was more to this. There had to be. It was actually a matter of going all out to put the watch back into her possession. She could take no other reasonable view of it and, once her thinking had reached that point, there rose to plague her a memory of the article in that news weekly. The writer had emphasized the fact that her missing watch would constitute a soft spot in the otherwise firm case against Everett Kingsley's nephew. Suppose it was not he who had taken her watch, not he who had struck her down that night, not he who had come into the service hall, not he who had killed his uncle.

If he were innocent, would it not be most convenient for the guilty man to have this nephew arrested, have him come to trial, have him convicted of the crime, even have him executed for it? Any murderer is a hunted man, and nothing can end the hunt except the capture and final punishment of someone. The hunt might end with the capture and execution of the murderer. Would not a murderer be ready to go to any lengths to have it end instead with the capture and execution of an innocent man?

There was a strong case against the dead man's nephew, a case that satisfied the police on every point but the one, a case that had only the one weakness — the fact that it did not explain the stealing of Hortense Clinton's watch. There had been that one point, and the young man's attorney might have built his defense on it, might have won him an acquittal on it, and then the hunt for the murderer would have been on again.

Now Hortense Clinton had her watch back. She would be set down as a silly, hysterical woman who mislaid her jewels and reported them stolen. The police would be satisfied with their case against Everett Kingsley's nephew. They would look no farther. That would be worth any amount of trouble to a murderer.

And there was more. There were the insurance people. Even if her watch had remained lost, the police might have made good their case against Lawrence Kingsley, but the case could never have been completed for the insurance people. They would have gone on looking for that watch. Now the watch was back and they would be out of it.

It made so much better sense that way, Hortense was thinking. It made excellent sense, but it meant that among these amiable people in this quiet corner of woods and sea there must be one who would not be

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what he seemed. Among them must be a murderer, but which?

Hortense tried some probing questions. She felt she had to know more about Dr. Blandy and Jim and Blackie. Someone had followed her here from New York. Dr. Blandy? He had taken her hat-and-shoe case on the train. His hands were always going to her throat, demonstrating that operation. Hortense shivered, thinking of his hands, and she wondered about stranglers. Would a strangler have some subtle compulsion to handle people's throats?

Trying to make the question casual, she asked when Dr. Blandy had made his reservations. Mrs. Evans answered readily and Hortense found the answer frighteningly to the point. He had phoned at the last minute before catching a plane to Boston to connect with the boat. She had given Mrs. Evans little notice, but he had given less. Had Dr. Blandy made his reservation only because he had learned of hers? That question she didn't ask. She couldn't. Both Mrs. Evans and Herbert had gone on to tell her about Dr. Blandy, how he never knew before the last moment whether he could leave his patients or not, how he always came on such short notice and sometimes even with no notice at all, how they always found a corner for him even when they were full up. Herbert told about the time when he came at the height of the season and there was not even a corner. That time Dr. Blandy had taken a sleeping bag out to the woods. That was Dr. Blandy.

Hortense sighed. Even her most fantastic suspicions could not go so far as imagining a conspiracy, a conspiracy in which all these good people would be involved — Mrs. Evans and Herbert and all the rest of the staff. Dr. Blandy was an old patron of the Lodge. She had to accept that. Actually she did not quite accept it. She held it suspended in her mind. That would be one of the problems for the police. She could do no more than tell them what she knew.

"The boys," she said. "Jim and Blackie. This is their first visit, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Evans. "Aren't they delightful lads?"

"Delightful," Hortense agreed. "It seems so strange that they should come here, though," she said. "I should think they would go somewhere where they could be gay — dancing and tennis and that sort of thing."

"They appear to be well satisfied," said Mrs. Evans, and there was just a chilly trace of rebuke in her voice.

If Hortense had not been so tensely on the alert to catch every faintest nuance, she would probably have never noticed that Herbert had chuckled and made as if to speak. She did notice, however, and she was promptly convinced that in speaking so quickly and so frostily Mrs. Evans had

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deliberately headed off something Herbert might have told her. She studied the back of Herbert's head and the neat silhouette of his ears — all that she could see of him — and she had a feeling that he was grinning quietly to himself, as though in enjoyment of something odd he had not been permitted to share.

"This is their first time here, isn't it?" Hortense asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Evans, "it is."

"I wonder how they happened to come?" Hortense went on with it, trying to sound as though she were just idly making conversation.

Mrs. Evans politely covered a yawn. It was such a small and controllable yawn that it could easily have been contrived.

"Haven't they told you?" she asked. "I should have thought they might. They like you enormously."

"They joke so much," said Hortense, "that I never quite believe anything they say. We had to share a table at breakfast in Yarmouth and then they walked me to the train. I happened to tell them that I was coming here and they would have me believe that they chose to come to be with me. That, of course, is quite absurd."

"I should think you'd be pleased that they wanted to go where you were going," said Mrs. Evans.

Hortense most decidedly didn't like the woman's tone. It was barbed and tipped with acid. She began to think she might have misjudged Mrs. Evans. This was something notably catty in the way of sarcasm, and she had ticketed the lady as being all gardening and good will.

"I'm not that sort of a fool," said Hortense sharply. "I'd look pretty silly preening myself on being followed about by Jim and Blackie. You must have had their reservations long before you had mine, and if people were to jump to any such absurd conclusions, they would be more likely to think that it was I who was following the boys around."

"Oh no," said Mrs. Evans. "No one could think that, because you did have a reservation and they had none. We sent the car down for you and Dr. Blandy, and so far as we knew, you were the only two guests due on that train. Jim and Blackie were a complete surprise for me. They had just assumed that after the season there would be room, and as it happens, there was."

There wasn't anything in the words at which Hortense could have taken umbrage, but she was too expert in the techniques of ladylike insult for any inferences to escape her. Mrs. Evans was telling her not that no one could suspect Hortense of pursuing these boys but rather that, despite appearances, the fact that she had had a reservation and that they

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had not cleared her of suspicion.

For the few remaining minutes of the ride they talked weather and wild flowers. When they reached town Mrs. Evans was all gentle solicitude again. She had her shopping to do but that could wait. They would first take Miss Clinton to the police.

"I wouldn't want to inconvenience you," Hortense protested. "You've been so very kind."

"My dear," Mrs. Evans interrupted, "it's nothing. Your business with the police will take no time at all and then we can go shopping."

"Suppose you just drop me off at the police station," Hortense suggested, "and when I'm through there I'll wander about the shops and find you."

"But you'll want someone with you," Mrs. Evans protested.

"Thank you," said Hortense, "but I'll be quite all right alone."

Mrs. Evans gave every appearance of doubting it. She suggested that she might walk to the shops and Hortense could keep Herbert with her. Then, after they were through, Herbert could make the rounds with the car and pick up all the purchases.

"I wouldn't think of it," said Hortense. "It will just be a nuisance for you and I'd rather see the police alone, if you don't mind."

Mrs. Evans froze again.

"Certainly," she said. "As you wish."

"It will be so simple." Hortense tried to make her refusal seem a little softer. "You can collect your packages as you go, and since there is only the one street I can't possibly have any trouble finding the car."

"Be easy on that point," said Mrs. Evans. "We shan't go off without you."

They did go off to do their shopping, however, and Hortense went into the police station alone. After a few preliminary explanations, she found herself closeted with Mr. Levering. Mr. Levering wore tweeds so British that it was impossible to determine whether he had just come in from a country walk on which he had picked up a couple of burrs or if the prickly bits were native to the fabric. His mustache was of the sort that is usually described as military because it is difficult to conceive of any man not bred on the parade ground having the capacity for exercising so iron a control over his facial hair.

Mr. Levering had a smile—a kindly, comfortable sort of smile which he deployed about the pipe he held clamped between his teeth. They were large, strong white teeth, and the pipe was so very short of stem that Hortense wondered whether Mr. Levering might not have on occasion bitten a short length or two off it.

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He seemed not at all like a policeman, and Hortense, remembering from English novels a gentleman who belonged to the county hunt and was familiar with all the best houses of Whatevershire and who would be known as the chief constable, wondered whether the police system in Nova Scotia might not be on the English county pattern. Mr. Levering, if she was to think of him as a policeman, would have to be the chief constable type.

He began their interview with amenities that were completely in the manner.

"Miss Clinton," he said, rising from behind his desk and coming around to adjust a chair for her comfort, "my name's Levering."

"How do you do?" said Hortense.

He twinkled at her. "I should say I was doing very well today," he answered. "In my job most days I have no visitors at all, and when I do they are mostly dull or unattractive or both."

Hortense smiled. "You're gallant, Mr. Levering," she said. "I'm afraid I shall be very dull and this visit will be something of a trial for your gallantry."

A large red setter wandered in and gravely examined Hortense's shoes.

"That's Rob Roy," Levering explained. "He's a good dog, really, but being here with me so much, he's inclined to forget his manners."

Rob Roy completed his investigation in the most mannerly fashion and gracefully settled himself at Hortense's feet and closed his eyes. She stroked the fine silky hair between his ears, and the plume of his tail whisked lazily across the floor.

"He's very much the gentleman," said Hortense.

Levering smiled and nodded. Returning to his seat behind the desk, he removed the pipe from between his teeth and held it in his hand.

"You're at the Lodge?" he said.

Hortense nodded.

"I hope my old friend Mrs. Evans is well?"

"Very well," said Hortense.

"And Miss Catherine and Miss Emily?"

"We play bridge every evening."

Levering laughed. "I might have known," he said. "They will have none of me now. They've found a more expert fourth. I shall have to come out and call on them in any event, wanted or not."

"I'm certain you'll be most welcome," said Hortense.

"If I'm not, I'll say I've come to see you. Perhaps even officially. That will be one in the eye for Jane Evans. When's Mollie coming home?"

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"Mollie?"

"You don't know Mollie? I thought you might have met the day you came. It wasn't till that afternoon she took herself off. Mollie Evans—she's Jane's niece. Used to go after salmon with me, but now she's reached the age when she fancies her dignity. Doesn't like the look of herself in waders, although she won't admit it. She'll be back. You'll like Mollie."

Hortense began to wonder just how she would go about introducing her business with this gentleman. She hadn't been prepared for the local police taking her call as though it were purely social.

"If I don't get to it before he serves tea," she thought, "I'll never get to it. I wish he wouldn't look so much as though he were about to feed me crumpets."

"You're going to think I am a madwoman," she said aloud.

Levering fondled his pipe. "A matter of lost jewelry, my men tell me."

"Not nearly as simple as that," said Hortense. "It's finding it that's so worrisome."

He beamed at her. "Oh no, Miss Clinton," he said. "That's much simpler. You found a watch?"

"My watch," said Hortense, wishing he would do something business-like, like asking her to make her statement. She felt that this was leading into nothing but a bout of confusion that would put the Mad Hatter's tea party to shame.

Hortense took the bit in her teeth and, even though he had not requested it, she did make a statement. That part of it was easier than she had anticipated. He had seen newspaper accounts of the Kingsley murder, and with careful attention he heard her out.

"With my watch coming back to me this way," Hortense finished, "I can't make any sense of it except under two possibilities. Either the nephew has a confederate and that confederate is at the Lodge or else the nephew is innocent and the true murderer is at the Lodge. Either possibility is horrible, and it's no good saying just forget about it."

"Obviously." He sighed and set down his pipe. "Do you suspect any one person at the Lodge specifically?"

Hortense had a feeling that what he considered obvious was not her conclusion but merely that it would be no good telling her to forget about it. She answered his question.

"Three people," said Hortense. "I can't say I really suspect them, but they do bother me. There have been little things that have been peculiar, nothing that was of itself alarming but, considered with this, they might be important. You see, Mr. Levering, if somebody followed

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me up here to get the watch back into my possession, I would assume that this person would like to do it in such a way as to make it seem that I had merely mislaid the watch and in the natural course of events had turned it up again. I think there have been attempts to get the watch back to me in just that way and that it was dropped in the shoe because the robe hung over the shoe and since the other attempts had failed that was the best the murderer could manage."

"Murderer, Miss Clinton? Let's not assume the worst. You yourself suggested the possibility that it might be a confederate of the nephew's."

Hortense shook her head. "No," she said. "Telling you about it has clarified it for me somewhat. That young man, the nephew, is innocent, and that makes it more than ever important. It had to be the murderer who put the watch in my shoe. No one but the murderer would choose that particular spot, the place where it could seem to have dropped from the robe. No one but the murderer could know that I was wearing that particular robe when he struck me down."

"Hmm," Levering grunted, ostensibly reserving judgement on that point. "Would you care to name the three persons who, as you say, bother you in this connection?"

"It's most distasteful," said Hortense, "but I have no choice."

Levering said nothing. He just sat there, regarding her gravely and waiting for her to name her suspects. Now that she had come to it, a reluctance had taken hold of her. It seemed to her that she was about to do a dreadful thing. There rose in her mind the picture of Lawrence Kingsley as he had stood before her. She saw the reproach in his eyes when she had said of him nothing that was by any far cry as damaging as what she had to say now of people who had done her many kindnesses. She felt horribly alone as she braced herself to speak. Reaching down, she stroked the setter's ears. He had been dozing at her feet. Her touch roused him and he rose and stretched. With slow majesty he walked around the desk and settled himself to sleep, this time with muzzle resting on the instep of Levering's shoe.

"Dr. Blandy." Hortense blurted out the one name which came most easily.

The gentle smile came back to Levering's lips.

"Did you know Dr. Blandy in New York, Miss Clinton?" he asked.

"Oh no."

"When did you first meet him?"

"On the train just after we left Yarmouth. He had my hat-and-shoe case and was trying to open it."

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"You were on your way here then?"

"Yes."

"Then it is impossible that Dr. Blandy should have in any way suggested your coming to the Lodge or induced you to come to the Lodge?"

"Quite impossible. I had stopped at the Lodge for luncheon once when motoring through and had liked it very much. I wanted to be away from New York, and a friend who had been with me on that motor trip reminded me of the Lodge. I telephoned Mrs. Evans for a reservation."

"Good," said Levering. "Then you can rest easy about Dr. Blandy. We know him well up here and he is fine man and a great doctor. It would be too much of a coincidence. Even if Blandy were a rascal, it would be too much of a coincidence that you should choose to come to just the one place where he always goes. You recognize that, don't you?"

"I suppose so," Hortense conceded.

She knew that it was a completely incredible coincidence, but she was nevertheless reluctant to admit it even to herself. Eliminating Dr. Blandy narrowed it down to Jim and Blackie, and she didn't like having any part of narrowing it down. It made her feel too much the huntress.

"I was just thinking," she added somewhat desperately, "that it could have been a coincidence but not quite so great a one as that."

"Yes?" Levering encouraged her.

"Suppose," she suggested, "that the murderer learned that I was coming up here. I had moved to a hotel in New York, and getting at my hotel room was probably too dangerous. Wouldn't this much coincidence be possible? The murderer learned I was coming to the Lodge. It was a stroke of luck for him. He knew that Dr. Blandy always comes here. He might have taken advantage of the lucky chance and told Dr. Blandy some tale about a practical joke or even played on his sympathy and told him the truth. He might have persuaded Dr. Blandy to take the watch up here and slip it in among my things."

Levering shook his head. "Any coincidence is possible, Miss Clinton," he said, "but even that coincidence is quite improbable. Furthermore, you said only a little while ago that only the murderer would drop the watch in your shoe because only the murderer would recognize the robe that hung above the shoe. That was good reasoning, Miss Clinton, and I think we can assume that the murderer would not have described the robe to Dr. Blandy, described it so exactly that he would recognize it in your closet. We can rule out Dr. Blandy. There were two others?"

Hortense sighed. "Yes," she said grudgingly. "They seem so very nice and they're just youngsters. I can't begin to believe it of them, and yet. . . ."

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"The two lads who aren't twins, Edwards and Black?"

Hortense was startled. "You know them?"

Levering smiled at her. "We are not so large here or so busy, Miss Clinton," he explained. "Everyone knows of arrivals and departures at the Lodge. Hereabouts we're all most ordinary, and any visitors we have here in town are also quite ordinary. The only unusual and exciting people we see are the guests of the Lodge. They were also on your train. Did they make any attempts on your luggage?"

Hortense wished she could be certain about this man. He was so gentle and so patient and there was always that smile of his. There were too many things that smile could mean. It could be his completely gentlemanly manner of laughing at her. It could be a superior masculine indulgence, again gentlemanly, of what seemed to him to be hysterical feminine delusions. It could be a beautifully smooth effort to protect old friends—Dr. Blandy he evidently knew, Jim and Blackie he spoke of familiarly, and Hortense was bothered still by the way Mrs. Evans had frozen when she sought to ask questions about the two boys.

She answered his question. "I shouldn't want to say they did," she said, "but I can't in my own mind be certain that they haven't."

After that he asked her to tell him all about Blackie and Jim so that he might try to draw his own conclusions. She told him. As she spoke she felt as though she were shedding responsibility. She was telling all she knew to the proper authorities. If any accusations were to be made, this man could make them.

"I'll tell him everything," she thought, "even the silly parts. If he chooses not to believe me, it will be his fault. I'm doing all I can."

She left nothing out—her first glimpse of the boys and the bit of conversation she had inadvertently overheard, the bit about Jim's failing to knock someone dead the first time.

Levering tried to gnaw a corner of his mustache but failed. It was too neatly clipped, no trailing ends within reach of his teeth.

"'Knock her dead,'" he repeated. "Isn't that a slang phrase commonly used in the States? It has a familiar ring."

Hortense nodded. "That's what I've been trying to tell myself."

"Without success?"

"With success most of the time, but just now and again there would be something a little too peculiar, and now finding the watch. . . ."

Levering nodded and she took it as a signal to continue.

She told him how they had captured her at breakfast in Yarmouth and carried her off to her train. She told of their going off to find her lug-

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gage and of being gone rather too long, since the train was short and her bags clearly marked and most distinctive. She told of their learning where she was going and then announcing that they too were going to the Lodge. She told of their having no train tickets and paying the conductor in cash. She even told of their banter when they rescued her from Mrs. Gadsden the first afternoon, their assurances of their skill at working strange combinations.

At that point Levering again interrupted.

"But apparently the watch was not put in one of your bags," he said.

"That's just it," Hortense argued. "Those combination locks are excellent and they were talking nonsense. They couldn't possibly open them, but if they had tried and failed and knew they would have to just drop the watch in my closet, isn't it possible that they would choose to talk just that sort of nonsense in the hope that when I did find the watch I would think of anyone but them?"

Levering looked as though he were taking the point under advisement.

Hortense pushed on into an account of her conversation with Mrs. Evans in the car, emphasizing every peculiar aspect of the boys' arrival at the Lodge and of their being at the Lodge at all. When she had finished there was a long silence. Levering fondled his pipe. He moved his foot slowly back and forth, as though stroking the underside of the setter's muzzle with it. The dog roused and stalked majestically out of the room, and he watched it go. He toyed with the few objects that sparsely occupied his desk top. When he finally did speak, his words came shyly and diffidently, as though he were finding it difficult to say them to her.

He appreciated her feelings and he was very glad she had come to him. She must feel free to call upon him any time. That under the circumstances she should be much disinclined to trust anyone was natural and inevitable. The unlikely accident, the almost impossibly complicated accident, was never easy to credit; but one must recognize that there were almost no limits to the possibilities of the accidental and that what she had experienced in this matter of her watch was just that, one of these almost impossibly complicated accidents.

"Dr. Blandy I know well," he said. "And although I do agree that Dr. Blandy, as he comes here to us in these unbuttoned moods of his, is likely to be rather disconcerting, I can assure you that there is nothing in Dr. Blandy's behavior on this visit that is one whit different from what we have had from the doctor and have expected of him over a period of many years. That leaves us the two young men, and with regard to them I shall have to ask you to trust me."

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"Trust you?" Hortense asked. "I don't understand."

"I have a good deal of information about them," he explained, "unofficial information, but quite trustworthy. You are quite right in your feeling that they have purposes and intentions here which they have not publicly avowed. That, I am afraid, is a matter I am not free to discuss beyond assuring you that there is nothing criminal or even reprehensible about their secret and that, furthermore, it has not the remotest connection with either you or that horrible affair in New York."

"You might have been misinformed," Hortense argued.

"I hardly think so, Miss Clinton, but I shall make discreet inquiries about these young men, if only to make doubly certain. Meanwhile I should like you to think carefully, to wipe from your mind all your feelings about them and Dr. Blandy, to try to see this thing in terms of accident. I want you to know that I am deeply concerned about your peace of mind, but I do think that with a little effort you can put yourself at ease. You must try."

"I have been trying."

Quietly and persuasively he led her along, cajoling her into reconstructing a series of accidents. There were drawers in her dressing table in New York. She did have lacy things in those drawers. She could have set the watch on the dressing table and inadvertently swept it into one of these drawers. She could have, without knowing it, packed the watch. In her luggage the watch could have come detached from the laces in which it had been caught to attach itself to the lace cuff of her gown.

Step by step she reluctantly conceded each possibility, but even as she was conceding the last she stopped short.

"No," she said abruptly. "That is not possible."

"Not possible, Miss Clinton?"

"No. Things from my drawers I packed in one case. Things from my closet, hanging things that have to be folded for packing, I packed in another case. The robe was packed with dresses and things like that, things from my closet."

Levering was not impressed. So far as she could see, to him this was just another obstacle he had to coax out of her thinking. Again he was leading her along. Again he was gentle and persuasive. However systematic one might be in packing, one case was likely to fill too full. Another to have empty spaces. One of the last acts of packing invariably would be one of those small changes of plans, the transfer of some stuff from one case to another.

That seemed to terminate the interview. He saw her out to the street

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and again he asked her to carry his best wishes to Mrs. Evans and the Misses McNab. Now, however, he also added messages of greeting for Dr. Blandy. He told her that he would be calling at the Lodge within a day or two and that he looked forward to seeing her then.

"I am certain," he said, "by then you will have remembered just exactly the handkerchief or other of your pretties that was your inanimate thief."

"I shall try," Hortense found herself promising, as though it would be rude and disobliging for her to do otherwise.

It had blown up cold while she had been with Levering and the wind on her throat made her shiver. She wished she had taken a scarf. She went doggedly on, her destination the combined post office and telegraph office. She would have to inform the insurance people and the New York police and, as she walked along, that simple intention changed. She was angry with herself. Her interviews with the local authorities had accomplished nothing. Somebody would have to see that it might not do to believe what was easiest and pleasantest to believe.

At the telegraph office she settled herself grimly to write her two telegrams. Out of her anger the wording shaped itself. She did not say that she had found her watch or that her watch had turned up.

"Watch has been returned to me under most suspicious circumstances," she wrote firmly on both telegraph blanks.

The wire to the insurance company she addressed to Vice-President Brewster. Even if all the police should take her story as casually as this Levering man seemed to take it, she thought she might hope for better from an old friend.

Grimly she met the eyes of the girl behind the telegraph office desk. She saw curiosity and astonishment in the girl's eyes. Curtly she finished her business and, turning on her heel, went out to the street. She could feel the girl's eyes on her as she went.

Outside she realized that her teeth were chattering. Whether from nerves or with the cold of the wind on her throat she didn't know. She felt that if she couldn't speak to someone who would listen to her and believe her she would scream. She was feeling sorry for herself as she started back along the street. She told herself that it was the wind that brought the tears to her eyes and in the next breath she was accusing herself of being a fraud, of being hysterical and ashamed to admit it. She wondered whether she mightn't have worded the telegrams as she did, not because she believed what she'd said, but because she was ashamed to admit that she had been mistaken about the watch all along.

She was ready to weep when Albert Haines fell into stride beside her.

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"I've been watching for you all morning," he said. "I thought I wasn't going to see you today."

Hortense forced a smile. "I've had an upsetting morning," she said.

He took her arm. "I can see you have," he murmured. "And what's more, you're cold. If it weren't for this absurd bottle store system they have up here, I'd take you into the cosiest bar in town and make you down a good stiff drink, which is the first thing you need; but it's no good dreaming, so it will have to be the teashop. A hot cup of tea might help."

Hortense did want that cup of tea but she explained about Mrs. Evans and Herbert and the car. She wasn't certain that she hadn't already kept them waiting.

His face fell. "I had been looking forward to our walk," he said. "Couldn't you get out of it?"

Hortense very much wanted to get out of it. She dreaded the ride back to the Lodge, knowing that even silence on that ride would be a question.

"I might." She smiled tremulously. "Let's find the car and see."

He walked along beside her and he asked no questions and Hortense was grateful. She was sick to death of being reasoned with. She didn't want to go through that again, not so soon. She spotted the car and Herbert standing beside it. Seeing her, he tossed away his cigarette and climbed in behind the wheel. He had his foot on the starter when she came up to him.

He grinned at her. "Ready?" he asked. "Mrs. Evans is going to be hours. She said I should run you back and then come back to fetch her."

"Oh no," said Hortense. "I can't have you doing that. I'll walk back. I've put you to too much trouble already."

"No trouble," said Herbert. "I like driving."

"And I like walking," Hortense insisted. "I walk in every day."

"I know." The boy hesitated, stealing a glance at Haines. "But we're getting a sudden blow and today on that road. . . ."

"Mr. Haines will be with me," Hortense assured him. "I'm quite all right."

"I'm glad." The boy made it sound as though he really cared. "Everything satisfactorily settled?"

"I feel fine," said Hortense.

She went on to the teashop with Haines. He toyed with a cup while she drank her tea, and when she had finished he poured her a second cup. He said nothing, and when she tried to make conversation he stopped her.

"You don't have to talk unless you really want to," he said.

She smiled at him gratefully and she didn't try to talk. She drank her

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tea. He excused himself and darted out of the shop. Through the curtained window she saw him as he hurried across the narrow street. Then he was out of sight and she remembered the wind and the tears that had come to her eyes. She brought out her mirror and fixed some straying wisps of hair. She didn't much like what she saw in her mirror. She seemed pale and, she thought, rather haggard. She was putting her mirror away when he returned. He had a small package with him and he set it on the table.

"It seems to be colder by the minute," he said. "I wouldn't want it to be too cold for you walking."

"I'll be all right," she said.

He nodded, pushing the package toward her. "Put that on," he said, "before we go out."

"What is it?"

"It's light and warm."

He undid the package. It was a long, broad stole of soft, light wool. Hortense remembered it in the shop across the street. She had admired it the day before, the cherry yellow and black of the MacLeod tartan.

"You shouldn't," she protested.

"I wanted to." He smiled. "And it is cold."

She put the scarf about her throat.

"This is lovely," she said. "I don't know why you should be so kind."

"Let's not talk about it," he said. "Shall we go?"

She nodded and rose. As they came out to the street he stopped her a moment.

"I hope," he said, "your business in the telegraph office was nothing you wouldn't want talked around."

He was directing her attention up the street. She looked. Herbert was standing beside the parked car again and he was deep in talk with the girl from the telegraph office.

"Oh," said Hortense.

Herbert and the girl looked toward the teashop. Hortense was certain he saw her, but he gave no sign and, quickly turning away, he gave the girl a playful push and went into a clumsy act of flirtatious roughhouse.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE long walk home did her good. Haines asked no questions, but there was something strangely warm and sympathetic about his patient silence. He managed to give Hortense the feeling that he simply wanted to be with her, that he asked nothing of her, no confidences, not even the barest sort of polite conversation. She had thought herself thoroughly weary of telling her story, but as they walked along she found herself telling it again, pouring it at him, all of it, her fears, her doubts, and her uncertainties.

He listened and she found his listening a comfort. The thought came to her that Levering had also listened, and she wondered why this should be so different, why it should have been that in telling Levering she had not been able to find this wonderful feeling of release that now seemed to be coming to her unsought. It might have been, she thought, that with Levering she had been under the strain of having to convince the man. With Albert Haines she was under no strain. He was just a good listener. Now and then he would offer some comment, but at no point did he take issue with her. His comments were never more than expressions of concern. It was only when she had finished her whole story, right down to telling him of the two wires she had sent and what she had said in them, that he even attempted to make any positive contribution.

He smiled at her approvingly. "You're a very remarkable woman."

"More likely," Hortense answered, "a remarkably silly one."

She had unloaded her burden of worry. The clouds had scudded off, and with the return of the sun all sharpness had gone from the wind's bite. Hortense loosened the long scarf and, as they walked, one of its bright ends blew gaily behind her. She felt suddenly light and happy.

"No," said Haines. "You did exactly the right thing. Unless I miss my guess, this local man, Levering, would be completely out of his depth on a thing like this. He'll want to think there's nothing to it because, if it should be at all as you think, he wouldn't even begin to know how to handle it. The New York police are quite a different story. You'll get action from them, and, however it turns out, you'll at least know where you stand. You can't go on indefinitely with these fears."

It was nice having his approval of her wire to the New York police. She had been less certain about that wire, afraid that it might have been

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merely hysterical.

"I had to wire the insurance company," she said. "I couldn't let them go through with paying me for a watch I hadn't lost."

"Obviously." Haines smiled. "I would say you could relax and leave it to the New York police, but, with both the police and the insurance company on it, you don't have to give it another thought. Insurance companies don't leave anything to chance or to guesswork. They are going to want to know all about this. Even though they don't have to pay the claim, they are going to want to know. There will be a thorough investigation. You can be certain of that."

Around the Lodge that day everyone tactfully talked of other things, the weather and her beautiful new plaid scarf. Even when she told the Misses McNab of the greetings Levering had sent them, they said nothing of her errand in town. They fluttered and bridled and they asked her if she hadn't found him an utterly charming man. She saw Herbert and Mrs. Evans, and neither of them referred to her talk with Levering.

Only Mrs. Gadsden even remotely suggested any possibility that Hortense might still be troubled, and her suggestion was so oblique that Hortense found it not at all difficult to avoid discussion.

"Do you feel better, my dear?" she asked.

"I feel very well, thank you," said Hortense.

"Another time," said Mrs. Gadsden, "I want you to know that you need only call me. I will bring you help."

"You are very kind," said Hortense.

"Wind and water," said Mrs. Gadsden. "Whatever are we here for if it is not to help others?"

"You are so right," said Hortense.

"Then you will remember. Whenever you feel the need of help, you just call on me."

She escaped from Mrs. Gadsden on the excuse that she wanted to swim before the sun went too low and it would be cold again and, having made her escape good, she found that what had first been an excuse was now a reality. She did want to swim. In her cabin she quickly changed to her bathing things. She had cleared her mind so completely of her troubles that when she noticed that her water pitcher had been freshly filled she thought with affection of Herbert and his attentions and she forgot her resentment of his little scene with the girl from the telegraph office, the little scene that Albert Haines had called to her attention and which at the time she had found so disquieting. Herbert was again just a dear boy who was almost too attentive.

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The sun was strong and warm but the water was cold. On that northern beach the ocean was always cold, shockingly, numbingly cold. Only the young and the sturdy dared its rigors, and Hortense, who was neither, always had to force herself to run those few steps in the icy water that took her to the point where she could plunge into the heart of a wave and put herself past the first terrible shock. She came over the rocks from the woods, going to the beach by her own private little path, and, as was her custom, she quickly dropped her things on the sand and raced for the water. She knew that if she did not go in at once she would lose her resolution and never go in. The rollers were coming in high and very blue and the surf looked so pretty in the sunlight that she forgot the morning's blow and did not recognize that it was running heavier than usual.

For a moment or two after her first plunge she was still unaware of the greater than usual turbulence. She was swimming strongly and the exertion was working her free of the numbness of that first icy shock. This was the best time. One went into the ocean for this, the short interval of returning warmth that came before the slow and inexorable chill would set in and drive her back to the sand. The warmth came quickly, and with it Hortense recognized that she was working unusually hard against the churning of the water.

"Rough today," she thought, but the thought brought satisfaction.

She was swimming competently despite the wild pull of the water.

Then abruptly she was not swimming competently. She had dropped into the trough between the waves and she began to sink, slowly and steadily, as though she were being pulled down. She thought of undertow and of queer currents that might develop among the rocks, and she struck out strongly to kick herself back to the surface. For a moment she felt herself rise and then she was going down again, down with a sudden violent jerk that was not of the water. She would feel the pull of the water on the whole of her body. This was a pull on her suit. Kicking hard, she ran her hands down over her suit. Her one thought was that it had caught on something under the water and she must free it, but whatever it was seemed to slide away ahead of her hand and, before she could even wonder, her legs were caught in a crippling grasp and her body rushed downward.

"I mustn't scream," she thought. "I mustn't scream."

She forced herself to hold her breath and fight. Her legs were pinioned. She couldn't kick. But her arms were free, and with them she struggled, struggled against the engulfing water, struggled for a hold on this creature

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who was pulling her down. Her hands touched something that moved lightly through the water. Hair. She tried to close her fingers on it but it was too short. She couldn't get a grip. She clawed wildly, seeking a face, seeking eyes, but it twisted away and her hands closed on water.

"Fool, fool, fool," she thought. "This is it. The end. You can't even fight it."

She gasped. Her head had suddenly broken from the water. There was a blue moment of sky above her and she caught her breath and screamed. Then the sky was gone as the great blue-green dome closed across it and broke. She had come up in the deep trough which a giant of waves had sucked up ahead of it, and now the giant broke upon her and tumbled her over and over, flinging her about, battering her. She felt her head hit dizzyingly against the bottom and a moment later her thigh was scraping sand. She felt the scrape all the way down to her ankle. Her legs were free. She could kick again. She could swim.

But there was no swimming in that maelstrom. The struggle had taken too much of her strength. The wave was receding now and the water was carrying her with it. With her last conscious thought she told herself she must let it take her. She mustn't fight it. She must wait and gather her strength till she could swim again. She must be still and waste nothing.

"Be still," she told herself. "Be quite still. You'll float and the water will carry you. Be quite still."

Then from nowhere there came hands and an arm across her chest and the slow and steady tug against the pull of the water. She wanted to fight it, but she was too spent.

"What's the use?" she thought. "He wants to drown me. He'll drown me. I haven't the strength to fight him."

She gave herself over to the numbing chill, and all her thinking seemed to come from deep inside her and it reached her but dimly. She thought what a fool this man was to take so much trouble. She had been drowning anyhow. He need not have come back to make it certain.

It was confusing because now she was out of the water and she was hearing familiar voices and she was too tired to listen. She was too tired for anything. Too tired to protest or to argue, but it was unkind for anyone to suggest that she might have been trying to kill herself. She gulped the whisky and coughed and spluttered. Why couldn't they have told her it was going to be whisky so that she might swallow properly instead of pouring it into her that way and letting it run up her nose? The whisky stung and brought the tears to her eyes. She felt sorry for

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herself and tried to sit up.

A firm hand held her down.

"Take it easy," said Dr. Blandy. "You've been up to enough nonsense for one afternoon."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. He looked quite unlike himself with his hair soaked tight against his skull and his shirt and trousers plastered wet against his skin. Nothing about him looked really familiar except his whisky bottle. Hortense began to shake. She thought the rattle of her teeth would drive her mad. She reached a hand out for the bottle.

Dr. Blandy laughed. "Swallow it properly this time," he said. "Choking on it, you just waste it."

He held the bottle to her lips and she swallowed. She felt the whisky warm her and she shut her eyes.

"Look, Doc, she's passing out again."

There was alarm in that voice, but the vowels pulled out softly and caressingly. Blackie.

So he was there too, and, she supposed, Jim. They were never apart.

"I saw her and was going to her."

That was another familiar voice, but it wasn't Jim's. It annoyed her that there should be this voice that she couldn't place.

"Out of the past," she thought, and she felt herself stiffen.

Danger also came out of the past. It had followed her up here out of the past. A voice that was familiar but unexpected, a voice that should not have been on that beach, and in the water a man had come up beneath her, had pinioned her legs and tried to drown her.

She opened her eyes and tried to speak. Dr. Blandy bent over her.

"Just shut up for a while," he said rudely. "You can talk all you like later. Now take it easy. Isn't it enough that you nearly drowned yourself and you made me get all wet, not to speak of getting unnecessarily sober?" He tipped the whisky bottle up to his own lips and she watched him make a start on fixing the last of that.

"Where were you?"

That was Jim's voice and it was hostile and suspicious. She turned her head and her eyes found Jim. He was in swimming trunks and he was wet too.

"In the water."

It was the voice again. She raised her eyes to look. Jim and Blackie and Dr. Blandy were easy. They were all kneeling around her, but this other man was standing. She followed his legs up to the canary-yellow shorts — canary yellow printed with a pattern of black dolphins and very fancy.

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Her eyes traveled on and they came to the man's face. She blinked and looked again.

"Gregg," she mumbled.

"A fine way to say hello." Gregg Atterbury was grinning down at her. She knew that brassy, impertinent grin.

"Hello," she whispered. "Somebody tried to drown me."

"Yes," said Atterbury. "I saw it. You were swimming along fine and some clown came along and pulled you under. It wasn't funny because a big one was coming along and it caught you badly. Might have broken your neck. That's rough surf out there, no place to be clowning."

"It wasn't clowning," said Hortense.

"It wasn't funny," said Blackie, and now there was a noticeable menace in his drawl. "Jim and I were on the beach. We heard you scream and went in after you. Doc, here, was up on the rocks and he jumped in with his clothes on."

"Blackie got to you and pulled you out," Jim contributed. "You were pretty well gone."

"You're right, it wasn't funny," Gregg cut in. "Whatever she says, I saw it. Some clown swam up under her and pulled her down."

"Couldn't have been you, maybe?" Jim snarled. "You were in the water. We were on the beach."

"That," Gregg murmured in his smoothest manner, "is what you say."

Hortense wanted to stop them, but they were shouting and she wasn't strong enough to shout against them. She made a little whimpering noise. It served.

"You dig this character?" Blackie asked her, and his voice was softly gentle again.

"In New York," Hortense said weakly. "I had no idea he was here."

"I was going to surprise you," said Gregg.

Blackie slowly and deliberately got up off his knees. His drawl slowed down to a creeping purr.

"Jim and me," he said, "we're going to match—that is unless you maybe want in too, Doc? Winner gets to take this trapper here apart. The trapper wanted to surprise her. The trapper comes up from New York and sneaks up on her and damn near drowns her. The trapper's cute. He's altogether too cute. The trapper needs mussing up. He needs it real bad. Me, I don't like the trapper's face anyhow. It's too pretty. I've got a real yen to find out how he'll look with his features rearranged a little." He pulled the zipper on the change pocket of his shorts and

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brought out a quarter. He tossed it and caught it on the back of his hand, slapping his other hand down over it. "You calling, Bud?" he asked Jim.

"Tails, Bud," said Jim.

Blackie uncovered the coin. "Better luck next time, Bud," he said. "Heads. The trapper's mine."

"Best two out of three," said Jim.

Blackie shook his head. "Sorry, Bud," he murmured. "I don't think trapper ought to be made to wait that long."

He dropped the quarter back into his pocket and zipped the pocket shut.

"Very funny," Gregg Atterbury said, and it sounded a trifle shrill. "I was in the water and you say you were on the beach and you didn't know a thing till you heard her scream, and yet somehow or other you reached her first. I call it very funny. What says it couldn't have been you who swam up under her? What says that isn't the reason you got to her so quickly? What says it wasn't you who got her in trouble in the first place?"

Blackie brought up his fists. "Trapper," he said, "if you don't fight any better than you talk, this is going to be dull."

Hortense gathered her breath. "Stop it." She tried to scream, but it was a feeble sort of scream. She turned to Blandy. "You're no child," she said. "Haven't you the sense to stop them?"

"The lady wants peace," Dr. Blandy announced. "She ought to have quiet."

Blackie grinned at her. "That's exactly the idea, ma'am," he said. "I'll quieten the trapper down for you."

"Don't be silly." Hortense struggled to sit up. Jim helped her and then supported her against his shoulder. "There was someone out there," she said, "and it wasn't horseplay. Someone tried to drown me, tried to kill me."

She saw the look that passed between Dr. Blandy and the boys. She knew that look and she wanted to protest against it. She wanted to explain, to tell them that she wasn't hysterical and that it wasn't shock.

Dr. Blandy took charge. "The first thing," he said, "is to get you to your cabin, and we'll have Mrs. Evans put you to bed. Then something hot to drink and I'll give you a sedative, and in the morning you'll be as good as new."

"Levering." Hortense carefully steadied herself to speak firmly. "There's this man Levering in the village. I want him called."

"Good man, Levering," Dr. Blandy agreed. "I'll call him. But first we

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get you to bed."

Gregg Atterbury turned his back on Blackie and Jim. He addressed himself directly to Dr. Blandy. He was making it clear. He was to be included among the sensible people.

"Suppose I run back to the main house and get someone to turn down her bed and get a fire started in her cabin," he suggested.

Blandy nodded.

"Tell Mrs. Evans," he said.

Atterbury took off. Blackie looked after him regretfully.

"It's okay, Bud," said Jim consolingly. "Trapper will keep."

"Yeah," Blackie muttered. "If he don't just keep on running."

Dr. Blandy scowled at him and he fell silent.

"I want you all to keep out of this," Hortense said. "I'll tell Mr. Levering. It will be up to him."

"Obviously," said Dr. Blandy. "How do you feel? Ready to try walking?"

"I'm all right," Hortense answered.

"She's beat," said Jim. "What's the matter with us carrying her? Bud and I?"

"I wouldn't think of it," Hortense protested.

Blackie smiled his most boyish, coaxing smile.

"Oh, come on," he said. "Let us. We won't drop you hardly at all."

They didn't carry her but they did assist her. The two boys supported her between them, and Dr. Blandy went ahead to bend back branches and hold them out of her way. Hortense found herself warming to Dr. Blandy as she had often enough before found herself warming to Jim and Blackie. The boys were contributing their usual banter and she remarked to herself on how nicely they did it, how engagingly, how disarmingly. Dr. Blandy, however, was as she had never seen him before — sober, gentle, considerate, very much the competent physician as he puts all that he has of skill and personality into tending a delicate patient.

She wondered at his sobriety. Had he been in his usual state of drunkenness when he had jumped from the rocks to come to her assistance, and had the cold water sobered him? It was possible, but the transformation from alcoholic to physician was so startling that it seemed more than any mere transition from drunkenness to sobriety, much more. The thought came to Hortense that this man seemed able to assume at will a professional sobriety. It was difficult to believe, and out of the difficulty grew that other thought, that Dr. Blandy, however he behaved, was never quite so drunk as he seemed. Much of it might be clowning.

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Clowning or some other pretense?

Her cabin was a bustle of activity. Herbert had laid a fire and was piling wood on it, building it to a roaring blaze. Mrs. Gadsden was there with her sleeves rolled up and she was doing deftly professional things to the bed, pulling sheets tight and fluffing pillows. Mrs. Evans stood by with afghans and hot-water bottles. Mrs. Gadsden, working in unprecedented silence, took Hortense away from the boys and helped her out to her bathroom. There she stripped her out of her bathing suit and rubbed her dry. She had Hortense tingling by the time she brought her to her bed. In a moment she was rid of Mrs. Evans and the boys. She did allow Dr. Blandy to stay, but she was less than gracious about that.

Hortense asked for Levering again.

"After you've slept," said Mrs. Gadsden firmly.

"And this will do it," said Dr. Blandy, approaching her with a hypodermic.

Hortense had a flicker of fear.

"What is it?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing, my dear," said Mrs. Gadsden. "You won't even feel the needle."

"Luminal," Dr. Blandy told her. "Good for the twitters."

She wanted to say she would do without it, but she had begun to ache all over. She remembered the wave that had tumbled her and the scrape of her thigh along the sandy bottom. The skin was burning where it had scraped and her every muscle felt wrenched and torn. Between them Mrs. Gadsden and Dr. Blandy had made her feel so much better. It would be good to sleep. She shut her eyes and the doctor injected the luminal.

"You staying with her?" she heard him ask Mrs. Gadsden.

"Naturally," Mrs. Gadsden replied. "I'm not going to leave her alone."

"I was going to sit with her awhile," said the doctor, "but if you will, I'll look in later."

"I'll send for you if she needs you," said Mrs. Gadsden, and it sounded as though she had made up her mind that Hortense was not going to need him.

Docilely he left. Hortense was careful to keep her eyes shut. This silent and competent Mrs. Gadsden was so different from the chattering bore Hortense had been avoiding. Hortense didn't want to do anything that might upset the metamorphosis. She didn't feel equal to one of the Gadsden spates of talk. From pretended drowsiness she drifted into a real drowsiness, caught up in the warm luxury of her bed. Occasionally she was

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dimly aware that Mrs. Gadsden was bending over her, laying a cool hand against her forehead or cheek, reaching under the covers for her pulse. Then she was aware of nothing. She slept.

When she woke it was dark. Everything was dim around her bed. On the hearth the fire had dropped to a bed of glowing coals, and in the far corner of the room Mrs. Gadsden sat under a lamp and placidly knitted. She had hung a towel over the lampshade to shield the light away from Hortense. She heard Hortense stir and, setting down her knitting, she came across the room and perched on the edge of Hortense's bed.

"I slept," Hortense said.

"Indeed you did," Mrs. Gadsden agreed heartily. "Are you feeling better?"

Hortense yawned and stretched, tentatively testing her bones and muscles. The aches were gone. She felt warm and comfortable.

"I feel lazy," she said, "but wonderful."

Mrs. Gadsden took her pulse again.

"As good as new." She smiled. "How would you feel about dinner?"

Hortense thought about dinner. It seemed a formidable thought.

"No," she said finally. "I think not. I'm too comfortable to get up for it."

Mrs. Gadsden laughed. "Oh, you couldn't get up for it," she said. "You don't leave here tonight. It's much too wild out. Listen."

Hortense listened, and the sound was wild and bleak and cold. She retreated from it, gathering her covers over her. She marveled that she hadn't noticed it till Mrs. Gadsden had mentioned it, because the wind moaned in the trees and the rain hissed against the windows. Branches creaked, and in the distance she could even hear the surf. It would be dashing high on the rocks for her to hear it here.

"I was sleepier than I knew," she said. "It's storming, isn't it?"

"A night of wrath," said Mrs. Gadsden. "A night of wrath."

"I can skip dinner."

"I can have them bring you something here," Mrs. Gadsden insisted.

"Perhaps later," said Hortense. "Has Mr. Levering come?"

"I wouldn't know. I've been with you all the time."

"You are kind," said Hortense humbly.

"Wind and water," said Mrs. Gadsden.

"Gregg Atterbury," Hortense murmured. "A young man. He was on the beach this afternoon."

Mrs. Gadsden sniffed. "I saw him," she said.

"What is he doing here?"

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"See no evil, hear no evil, think no evil," said Mrs. Gadsden.

"Evil? I was just surprised to see him on the beach. I knew him slightly in New York. I had no idea he was coming up here.

"Slightly," said Mrs. Gadsden, "I should think would be quite enough."

Hortense had to smile. "It is," she agreed. "Quite enough."

"Didn't you see him at breakfast?" Mrs. Gadsden asked. "I had my eye on him and I warned the waitress even before she went to bring him his breakfast. I know these men and I couldn't have been more right." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "It was exactly as I expected," she said. "When she brought him his coffee, he tried to p-i-n-c-h her."

"Disgusting," said Hortense absently.

"Sinful," said Mrs. Gadsden. "I don't know why Mrs. Evans took him in."

"Mrs. Evans," said Hortense, "is broad-minded."

"It would be better if she were narrow-minded," Mrs. Gadsden said sternly. "Being broad-minded can turn a resort hotel into Sodom and Gomorrah. Look at Dr. Blandy. Has he asked you to call him Bill yet?"

"No, he hasn't."

"He will. He's never had a woman patient who hasn't called him Bill, and the foolish women love it. There's a perfectly good g. p. down in the village, and if you take my advice you'll have him if you need anyone. This was an emergency, of course, but otherwise you have the man out from the village. He won't expect you to call him Bill."

"I'm as strong as an ox," said Hortense. "I shan't be needing a doctor."

"That," said Mrs. Gadsden, "is the way to talk."

Hortense tried to change the subject. "You've been sitting with me all the time," she said. "What about your dinner? Isn't it late?"

Mrs. Gadsden looked at her watch. "The dining room won't close for another half hour," she said. "It's eight o'clock now."

"Eight o'clock!" Hortense was horrified.

She insisted that Mrs. Gadsden go to her dinner. She would be quite all right without her, and if she would have them send her something light, she would do very well.

"You are quite yourself?" Mrs. Gadsden asked grudgingly.

"Of course I am."

"Then I will run along. I shan't be long, and as soon as I've eaten I'll come back."

Hortense protested, but Mrs. Gadsden would not be gainsaid. She started for the door and as she pulled it open the full fury of the storm sounded in the room. Hortense sat upright in her bed.

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"Mrs. Gadsden," she called.

Mrs. Gadsden shut the door and hurried back to her.

"You can't go out in that," Hortense scolded, "not as you are, with no coat and nothing for your head."

Mrs. Gadsden laughed. "Wind and water," she said. "It won't hurt me. I have my health."

They argued the question, but Hortense won. She made Mrs. Gadsden take her coat and she insisted that she also take the MacLeod tartan stole. When Mrs. Gadsden protested that it was too pretty to take out in the rain, Hortense laughed at her. Rain, she insisted, wouldn't hurt it any. She was helping Mrs. Gadsden wrap the scarf around her head and throat when the wind rose to its sharpest fury and with a great rending and crashing a tree or a branch gave way in the woods somewhere close.

"Listen to that!" Hortense exclaimed.

"A night of wrath," said Mrs. Gadsden.

She took herself off into it. Hortense lay back on her pillows and listened to the storm. Her thoughts were on little Mrs. Gadsden, and she visualized her as she would plow through it, buffeted by the wind and the rain. It seemed as though the wind had reached its climax with that wrenching burst just before Mrs. Gadsden had left. It sounded as though it had begun to slack off a bit, and Hortense wondered whether it had or if she was just hoping it had since Mrs. Gadsden was out in it.

"Wind and water," she thought and smiled.

She was scolding herself for laughing at Mrs. Gadsden. The woman was more than kind. Hortense had day after day given her more than enough reason to take offense, and now she had been more than kind. Her thoughts were so completely with Mrs. Gadsden that when, through the diminished sound of the rain, she heard a sound on the cabin porch her first thought was that it would be she, that the storm had been too much for her and she had turned back. She looked toward the door expectantly.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the broad porch window and briefly the whitish blur of a face against the glass. She turned her eyes to look and it was gone.

"How odd she is," she thought. "Why would she peek in that way instead of coming right straight in?"

Then her heart began to pound and she froze under the covers, fearfully watching the door and window. Mrs. Gadsden would come straight in. She wouldn't go to the window first. Without taking her eyes from window or door, Hortense tried to measure in her mind the

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distance from her bed to the fireplace. The fire irons. They were the nearest thing to a weapon she had at hand, and they were too far from the bed. At any moment the door would open and she would never make it to the fireplace in time. It was hopeless, and even if she could, this time it might be a gun.

Hortense waited and it was an eternity. Mrs. Gadsden had gone to get her dinner. She would go directly to the dining room, and when she ordered her own dinner she would have them take something to Hortense. Somebody would be coming from the dining room. Meanwhile she must be calm, calm and clever. She must be ready for him, whoever he was, when he would come through the door. She must pretend that he had merely come to inquire after her. She must not show that she suspected anything, knew anything. She must talk and talk fast, laugh at herself for being tumbled in the surf that afternoon, flirt with him, fool him if she could. Maybe he hadn't come to kill her. Maybe he would first try to find out what she knew. If she could just work for time, gain time, only enough time till someone came from the dining room.

She stiffened. Stamping footsteps on the porch and then quickly a knock at the door. For a moment she didn't answer. She had been waiting for the door to open, and now the knock confused her. She thought hard. Why would he knock? It was a good sign, surely. She might have a chance if she only didn't give herself away. She might be able to make the time, the time she needed till someone would come from the dining room. She steeled herself to speak without a tremor.

"Come in," she said, and painfully forced a smile.

The door opened and Herbert came in. He quickly shut the door behind him and stripped out of his dripping oilskins.

"I came over to find out what you'd like for dinner," he said. "Dr. Blandy says you can have anything you want."

Hortense collapsed against the pillows.

"Herbert," she gasped. "You frightened me horribly."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought Mrs. Gadsden would be here."

"She just left," Hortense explained. "She was going to get her dinner and she was going to send something over for me."

Herbert nodded and whipped out a menu. While Hortense looked at it, he built up her fire again. She asked for some broth and toast, and Herbert wrote it down. He was shrugging back into his oilskins when her visitors arrived. Now it was Dr. Blandy, flanked by Jim and Blackie. The doctor took the menu from Herbert and heartily disapproved the broth and toast. He was back in his usual simmer and, overriding her

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protests, he ordered her up a hearty meal.

Having disposed of that, he crossed to her in his streaming raincoat and was about to sit on the edge of her bed. Blackie made a dive for him and caught him. With Jim's help he took the doctor out of his wet waterproof.

"Wind and water," said the doctor. "I see you got rid of that woman. If you had the strength for that, you have the strength to eat properly. Broth and toast. You eat that and it makes you feel sorry for yourself, and when you feel sorry for yourself you get nervous and you start imagining things and it's all very bad for you."

"Mrs. Gadsden went to get her dinner," Hortense corrected him. "She's been wonderful."

"I bet," said Blandy. "I bet she warned you about me, too. I know she talked the ear off you."

"She didn't. I think you misjudge her, Doctor."

"She's the best nurse I know," said Dr. Blandy. "And the worst pain. And while we're at it, don't call me doctor. Call me Bill."

They stayed with her and Herbert brought her her dinner and they stayed on while she ate it. Mrs. Gadsden didn't return, but Hortense guessed that she wouldn't while these other visitors were in the cabin. After Hortense had eaten, however, Mrs. Evans dropped in and a little later Gregg Atterbury came to inquire after her.

While Jim and Blackie glowered at him, he put it right up to her.

"Hortense," he said, "I was in the water this afternoon and I saw you come in. I saw you go down, and a minute later I saw a man's head bob up where you'd been. It was some dope ducking you, and I thought it was a mighty silly trick in that rough surf. I saw it, and then you screamed and I started over to you, but I was quite a way off and they made it first. They were a lot closer. I'm not telling any story. I was nowhere near you, and you know I wouldn't pull a silly trick like that. You know me, and you know I know better."

"Let's forget it," said Dr. Blandy.

"We were closer," Jim growled. "I know what trapper means. It makes us the dopes."

"I was on the rocks," Dr. Blandy argued. "I saw Hortense and I didn't see anyone else. A big wave caught her and upended her — could happen to anyone. Why don't you all put your muscles away?"

"I wouldn't have dared that surf today," Mrs. Evans contributed.

"I was foolish," said Hortense meekly.

"It's all turned out all right," Mrs. Evans smiled. "Would you like me

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to stay here with you tonight?"

"Nonsense," Dr. Blandy exploded. "Hortense doesn't need anybody."

The man was drunk again, really drunk. Hortense watched him, trying to make up her mind. She remembered her thought that he might have pretended to be more drunk than he was. It could be an excuse for familiarity. She hadn't told him he could call her Hortense and she hadn't called him Bill.

"I suppose I'm silly," she began, "but I think, Doctor ——"

"You're to call me Bill," he interrupted.

Bill. She was to call him Bill. All his women patients did. Maud and her mysterious Bill who had told her about the Lodge. Maud's Bill who always came to the Lodge, and Maud had suggested that she come. Now he was so set on her spending the night in the cabin alone.

She thought resentfully of Maud and her men. Blackie and Jim had almost convinced her that it had been Gregg Atterbury who had pulled her under in the surf. Much as she disliked the slick youth, she ruled this out as an impossibility. Someone had tried to drown her, and only the murderer of Everett Kingsley would conceivably do that. Gregg Atterbury had seen Maud home after the party. He would not have had time to come all the way back, kill Everett Kingsley, ransack his apartment, and come out his service door in time to find Hortense on her doorstep. Now Dr. Blandy wanted her to call him Bill.

"There are millions of Bills," she told herself.

"Doctor," she said stubbornly, "I've been meaning to ask you. I think we have a common friend in New York, Maud Sellers."

"Maud Sellers," said the doctor quickly. "Never heard of her and don't change the subject. You're to call me Bill."

"She told me about the Lodge," Hortense persisted. "Brought me here the first time I came and suggested I come up here now. She'd heard about it from this man called Bill and he comes up here all the time."

"I've a million women in my life, darling," said the doctor, "but none of them's Maud. Maybe you better get some sleep."

He made motions to sweep all the visitors out of the cabin.

"Mrs. Gadsden said she'd come back after she'd had her dinner," Hortense said to Mrs. Evans. "If you would stay with me till she comes . . ."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Evans. "I'd love to."

She saw the men to the door and then settled herself comfortably by Hortense's bed.

"I rang Levering," she said. "I told him about your accident. He quite

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agreed with me about Dr. Blandy."

"What about Dr. Blandy?"

"You are overwrought, my dear, and isn't that Mr. Atterbury a rather hysterical sort of young man?"

"He's a horrid young man," said Hortense.

"Quite," Mrs. Evans agreed.

"But what does he have to do with Dr. Blandy?"

"You don't trust Bill and you can trust him, implicitly. I know what you were thinking just now. You were listening to Mr. Atterbury's nonsense about seeing a man in the water with you when you went under, and you immediately began thinking all that stuff about Bill. You're even thinking that one of your own friends sent you up here to give Bill a chance at drowning you. You are thinking that, aren't you?"

"I don't know what to think," Hortense confessed. "I must tell you something. After I spoke to Mr. Levering this morning I wired the New York police."

"Yes," said Mrs. Evans, "I know about that."

"And you don't mind?"

"Why should I mind?"

"I really don't want to make a scandal here."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Evans. "There won't be a scandal. I think it was a very good thing you did telegraph the New York police. I think you should do whatever you feel you can for your own peace of mind." She picked one of Hortense's books from the bedside table. "Wouldn't you like me to read to you?" she suggested.

She read as the fire burned down, and she was still reading when Hortense fell asleep. It was a deep sleep, a sleep of exhaustion. Mrs. Evans closed her book and sat watching Hortense. Her bland face fell into lines of pity. She almost dozed beside Hortense, but she was instantly alert when there came the soft tap at the door.

She went to the door and whispered for a moment with Herbert, on the porch. Then, white-faced and grim, she tiptoed back into the room, carefully adjusted the fire screen, switched off the lights, and tiptoed out, shutting the door carefully behind her.

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CHAPTER SIX

In the morning Hortense was surrounded by a hush. She woke comfortable and refreshed, obviously none the worse for her near drowning of the day before. It was, in fact, some moments after waking before she even began to remember anything of the day before, and she was brushing her teeth before she recalled that Mrs. Evans had been with her when she fell asleep. She wondered a bit whether Mrs. Gadsden had returned and when, during the night, she or Mrs. Evans had slipped away.

The rain had stopped and the woods outside the cabin window looked fresh and clean. The wind was still fairly high and she could hear it soughing in the branches, but with the sun up and a white scud of clouds across the very blue sky, it seemed an almost pleasant sound. Certainly it was nothing like the wild fury of the night before.

She was half through her dressing before she remembered that Mrs. Gadsden had taken her coat and the tartan stole, and she went to the closet to see if possibly she had returned them. She hadn't.

"They'd be wet, anyhow," Hortense thought. "I'll wear the tweed suit and the blue sweater and I'll be quite warm enough."

Outside the wind was colder than she had expected, and she stepped out briskly along her footpath. It was exhilarating weather, and Hortense marveled at how well she felt. She thought of the luminal and was pleased that she felt none of the thick muzziness one expects on waking from a drugged sleep. She laid it to the bracing morning and to the fact that the doctor had given her the luminal early and she had had ample time to sleep it out.

"As Mrs. Gadsden is always saying," she thought, "I must be happy. I have my health."

Thinking of the little woman and the incredible exuberance with which she appreciated her simple joys — joy in a cup of tea, in having her health — Hortense smiled, but the smile carried with it a gentle and kindly feeling. All her thoughts of Mrs. Gadsden now carried with them an affectionate warmth. She was actually looking for the little woman when she came into the dining room, but Mrs. Gadsden was not at her table and the table was not set.

Hortense asked the waitress if Mrs. Gadsden had already breakfasted,

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but the girl didn't answer. Instead she hastily put questions of her own. How was Miss Clinton feeling? Was Miss Clinton certain that she should be up? She could just as well have had her breakfast in her cabin. Had she seen Dr. Blandy that morning?

Hortense assured the girl she was quite fit and required no pampering. She ordered her breakfast. She was a long time eating it, because there were many interruptions. Each of her fellow guests in turn came over to pay his or her respects. They all asked how she was feeling. They all seemed concerned lest she might have left her bed too soon. They all looked at her with a wary and pitying and worried look, as though, despite her claims to feeling perfectly well, they knew that there was something seriously amiss with her. Even Jim and Blackie were grave, and their little efforts in the direction of their customary banter were forced and feeble. Gregg Atterbury was lugubrious, even funereal, but most incomprehensible of all was Dr. Blandy.

He was quite sober. He didn't even have a breath. He made no objections when she called him Dr. Blandy. It was as though he had completely forgotten that he had insisted that she call him Bill. He called her Miss Clinton, and his manner was at once unwontedly gentle and unwontedly austere. He, too, seemed distressed that she had gotten up for breakfast.

She laughed at him. "I feel perfectly well," she said. "What did you expect I would do — take to my bed for a month's siege of the vapors?"

He didn't answer that. Silently he took her pulse.

"You can't find a thing wrong with me," she insisted. "Can you, now? You can't give me any reason why I shouldn't be up and about."

"If you feel up to it," he said bleakly, "I suppose it can do no harm."

It was obvious that he regretted finding no adequate medical excuse for sending her packing back to her cabin, and Hortense was stricken with the notion that every last soul in the place shared his regret, that they had been looking to him hopefully, expecting that he would. When she came out of the dining room after breakfast, it was worse. People were gathered in little groups, talking volubly, but as soon as she approached there would be the covert glances in her direction and then an obvious change of subject or an even more obvious sudden onset of silence. Everyone was kind and affable. With her everyone discussed the weather and, even for discussion of the weather, what they all had to say to her was uncommonly vacuous. There was something afoot, and she moved through a conspiracy of silence. There was only one topic of talk that morning and a general determination that she was to have no part in it.

Hortense wandered away from the Lodge. She was angry. She searched

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for explanations, and such explanations as came to her only made her angrier. She knew resort hotels and she knew the atmosphere that grew in them with the development of any juicy morsel of gossip. Such was the atmosphere of the Lodge that morning, and since she alone was excluded, it seemed to her axiomatic that it must follow that she was the subject of the gossip.

She had started back to her cabin, but abruptly she turned off the road and took the other footpath, the one that led toward the lake and the boathouse. Mrs. Gadsden's cabin was on that path and she would go see Mrs. Gadsden. Mrs. Gadsden was always in the lounge at the main house after breakfast, and she hadn't been there today. The poor thing might have taken cold, going through the storm. Surely it had been storming badly enough. The least Hortense could do would be to walk around and ask. In any event, she did have to thank Mrs. Gadsden for her kindness.

She remembered the cabin. It was the second from the end along the lake path. She knocked and a subdued voice invited her to come in. Hortense opened the door and, thinking she had remembered wrong, started to apologize and withdraw. It wasn't Mrs. Gadsden in the cabin but a young girl, a lovely young girl in a tweed skirt and a fleecy sweater.

"I was looking for Mrs. Gadsden," Hortense said. "I'm so sorry."

The girl smiled at her. Then quickly the smile faded and the girl flushed.

"Mrs. Gadsden isn't here," she said.

She half mumbled it, as though she weren't even certain she should say that. She stood as she had been when Hortense opened the door, with a folded bed sheet in her hand, about to shake it out. She was changing the bed.

"How silly of me," Hortense thought. "It's just one of the maids. I was fooled by the sweater and skirt, but why not? It's another of those college-girl maids and she's making up the bed."

"I missed her at breakfast," Hortense explained, "and I thought she might have taken cold or something. I wanted to thank her. She was most kind to me last night."

The girl nodded. "You're Miss Clinton," she said.

"Yes," said Hortense.

The girl dropped the sheet on the bed and came over to Hortense with her hand extended.

"I'm Mollie Evans," the girl explained. "Mrs. Evans' niece. That surf must have been something yesterday afternoon."

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Hortense returned the girl's smile and took her hand.

"It was something," she said. "Mollie Evans — then you'll be the Mollie Mr. Levering was asking about yesterday. He was hoping you'd be back soon."

The girl caught her lip between her teeth. "Oh dear," she said. "I do feel a fool."

"Why?"

"I've been so ridiculously schoolgirlish and now I feel conspicuous."

Hortense wondered whether she was expected to understand that. She didn't even begin to understand it.

She laughed. "Perhaps we might be conspicuous together," she said. "That happens to be my specialty."

The girl laughed with her. "Nonsense," she said. "I know exactly what they're like."

Hortense gave up. "You know," she said, "this could be a charming exchange of confidences if either of us had the slightest notion of what the other was talking about."

The girl blushed again. She had a pretty blush. She had the clear skin and the vivid coloring for it.

"Oh dear," she said. "When you said that Bruce Levering had talked to you about me, I assumed you knew. I was sure he'd told you."

"He asked me if you'd returned, and when I didn't know who you were, he explained that you had left the day I arrived, but he'd thought you hadn't gone until after I'd arrived or something like that."

"It was after you arrived. I saw them and I fled."

"Saw whom?"

"Jim," the girl said, "and Blackie."

Hortense shook her head. "Mollie," she said, "I have a feeling that none of this is my business."

"Don't let that bother you," Mollie answered. "It's everyone's business by now, and he is sweet, isn't he? I've been awfully silly."

"Who's sweet?"

"Jim."

"Jim? Not Blackie?"

"Oh, Blackie's a dear, too, but like a brother."

"I see what you mean," Hortense murmured. "I'd thought rather like a nephew, but that's the differences in our ages. Since we've gone this far, do you mind telling me why you fled?"

"That's hard to explain, and with most people I shan't even try, but you know them and I think you'll understand. I met them in New York

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at a party and they took me home, and then the next day Jim called and asked me to go to the theater. They both came to pick me up and we did have a lovely time at the theater. You know how much fun they can be. Then after the theater we went dancing and Jim asked me for the first dance. We went around the floor once without Jim's saying a word — not even small talk — and then he blurted it out. I could hardly say yes, could I?"

"What did you say?"

"'Marry you?'" Mollie quoted herself. "'Don't be silly.'"

Hortense crossed the room to an easy chair and sat down. Mollie went back to making up the bed.

"Then what?" Hortense asked.

"We went back to the table and he told Blackie that he'd asked me and I'd told him not to be silly and Blackie said that was what's wrong with girls they're always irrelevant and they just went on talking about it that way back and forth, the way they have till you're dizzy. You know how they always call each other Bud till you hardly know which is which and wonder if they know themselves?"

"Yes," said Hortense, "I've noticed it."

As Mollie worked at the bed she told Hortense the whole tale. She had danced with Blackie, and all the time they had been dancing Blackie had talked to her, telling her what a fine fellow Jim was, asking her what she she had against marrying him, coaxing her, persuading her. When they returned to the table Jim asked Blackie whether he had succeeded in softening her up any and the two of them had discussed her and what arguments they might use to move her as though she weren't even there.

"It went on that way all the time," she said. "It was utterly fantastic. Night after night they kept after me, the two of them. It was really most wearing."

"I should think it might be," Hortense chuckled. "Didn't Jim ever come courting alone?"

"No. When it had been going on for almost a week, I asked them about that. They didn't even think it was peculiar. They were a team. They always did better together, but Blackie did wish I wouldn't be so stubborn because he had his eye on a girl he thought he wanted to marry and if I would say yes to Jim, they could go to work on her and get her to say yes to Blackie."

"I dare say they will," said Hortense. "Although I've never heard of anything like it."

"Oh, they will," Mollie assured her, and her tone was one of pleased

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resignation. "They say it's the buddy system. They learned it in the Army and it never fails. It seems to have worked with me."

"Already?"

"I've done well to hold out this long, and I managed that only by running away. They had me so dizzy I couldn't think, so I ran away from them and came up here. Then, of course, they came popping in up here, but I saw them before they saw me and I took right off and went to visit my cousin in Halifax. I thought they'd get tired and go away and I could come back here and think, but when I called my aunt last night and she was so upset I knew I had to come back here and help. I suppose I'd known for days I would, but it seemed so odd, just coming back to say yes. I was waiting for some excuse."

"You have all my best wishes," Hortense said. "And I do hope they get Blackie his girl. Otherwise you'll find yourself married to both of them. It will be confusing."

"Oh, that's all right," said Mollie airily. "I'll help them break her down, and if that doesn't work I'll find him another one. I know lots of girls."

"That takes care of Blackie," Hortense murmured. She rose from her chair. "Do you know where I might find Mrs. Gadsden?" she asked.

The girl, while talking, had developed a gay sparkle. Now it abruptly faded and she ducked her head while she worked vigorously at the bed, smoothing away nonexistent wrinkles.

"Oh, Mrs. Gadsden's gone," she said in a small, muffled voice.

"Gone?" Hortense echoed.

For the first time she thought to look about the room for signs of Mrs. Gadsden's occupancy. There were none. The whole cabin had the impersonal look that hotel rooms have in their intervals between patrons.

"You mean she's checked out, left the Lodge?" Hortense persisted.

"She's left," said the girl, and avoided her eyes.

There was something hidden here. This girl, who had been so free and candid in volunteering information on her own far more private affairs, had turned suddenly closemouthed at a simple question about a guest checking out of the Lodge. It was as though there might be some scandal that had to be hushed up, but the very idea of a scandal—a scandal which would involve Mrs. Gadsden—was patently absurd.

Hortense didn't press her. "My coat and scarf," she said. "She borrowed them to go through the rain last night. I wonder where she left them for me."

The girl went white and fussed over the bed some more.

"I'll speak to my aunt about it," she mumbled.

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Hortense rose and started for the door.

"Never mind," she said. "I'll ask her myself. She's somewhere about, I suppose?"

"She's gone down to the village, but I expect she'll be back before long."

"I'll ask over at the main house. One of the maids or someone will know. I'll ask around."

"No," the girl said sharply.

Hortense stopped in astonishment and looked at her. Now the girl was very white and she looked frightened.

"No?"

"I meant you'd better wait for my aunt. She'll know."

"There's something wrong."

"No, nothing," the girl answered hastily. "I'll go back to the main house with you. I'll check around for you."

They started up the path in silence. It seemed a heavy, an ominous silence, and it tore at Hortense's nerves.

"You behave," she said, "as though you thought Mrs. Gadsden might have gone off with my coat and scarf."

She meant it to be light, but evidently it wasn't. It startled the girl and made her even more uncomfortable.

Mollie broke out in a freshet of talk. "If she wore them out in the rain last night," she said, "I'm afraid they're going to be just days drying. That was a heavy, soaking rain and we're so near the sea here that even when the weather's fine things take just forever to dry."

They came out of the footpath to the road. Levering hailed them. He was walking along with Mrs. Evans and they were deep in the most earnest conversation.

"Oh, there you are," he called. "I've been to your cabin, looking for you. I expected you'd be there."

Hortense was about to answer, but the girl was quicker.

"Miss Clinton loaned her coat and scarf to Mrs. Gadsden last night," she said hastily. "I thought you might know about them."

Mrs. Evans stammered a bit. Hortense looked at her and was shocked by what she saw. The woman's eyes were swollen and her face was drawn and haggard.

"Oh dear," she was saying. "Oh yes. Miss Clinton's coat and scarf. Yes, indeed."

Levering dropped a hand on Mrs. Evans' arm.

"Couldn't that wait?" he asked. "First I'd like to take up my business with Miss Clinton."

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The look Mrs. Evans turned on him was incongruously grateful. It was the look of a woman who has just been done a great and unexpected kindness, a look of relief and of almost abject gratitude.

Levering took Hortense's arm and, with a jesting word for the girl and a mumbled something that might have been "Easy, old girl" for Mrs. Evans, he smoothly turned Hortense into her own footpath and led her away from the ladies.

"I thought we might go to your cabin for our talk," he said. "We'll be more private there."

"Certainly," said Hortense. "And don't tell me that there aren't any mysteries this morning."

Levering smiled at her. "Your hostess has been having a bad time," he said. "I'm glad Mollie's back. Fine girl, Mollie."

"She's been telling me all about that curious courtship."

Levering laughed. "It is odd, isn't it?" he said. "I couldn't believe it was at all the usual thing, even in the States."

"Unique," said Hortense.

"But they are fine lads. I've been watching them since they've been here, and either one, I'd say, would be fine for Mollie."

Hortense laughed with him. "Either one," she said. "But I hope not both."

"Damon and Pythias," said Levering.

He held the door of her cabin open for her. They went in and he asked her to sit down. He perched on the window sill.

"I have been talking with your New York police," he said.

"Yes?" Hortense waited.

"They had your report on your watch. They're pleased you found it."

"But they called you?"

"Routine check on the circumstances under which you found it," he explained. "Thorough fellows, your police down there. Very careful."

"They thought the circumstances suspicious?"

"No. Not at all. They just wanted to make certain. Leave no loopholes, you know. It's a sad business, but they have an excellent case against the nephew. It seems it was no ordinary quarrel. The lad, it appears, was in business with his uncle. There are some records missing from the office. Mr. Kingsley had evidently taken those records home. They have disappeared completely. The picture shapes itself. The records would have revealed some financial irregularity. Nephew stealing from the firm, you know, something like that. Mr. Kingsley would naturally take them home and have it out with the young fellow privately. The

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young fellow kills him and ransacks the flat for those records. He takes them away and destroys them. Horrible, but all quite understandable. Nothing there to trouble the police except this matter of your watch. That did distort the picture. It had them working on some pretty far-fetched theories, but now that you have your watch again, they're much relieved."

"But that's ridiculous," Hortense interrupted. "I don't know about farfetched theories, but they'll have to find something. The nephew is in jail in New York, isn't he?"

"He is."

"Then he couldn't have returned my watch to me here. What are these other theories?"

Levering smiled. It was evident that he was a patient man and would indulge her. He explained that the New York police had considered the possibility that the nephew, despite all the evidence against him, might have been innocent, that some other employee might have been guilty of financial peccadilloes which would have shown up in the missing records.

"My watch made them consider that possibility?"

"Farfetched, as I said," Levering answered. "It is a valuable watch, I understand. They didn't like the theory but, so long as your watch was missing, they had to consider it. This nephew of Mr. Kingsley's is his uncle's heir and he knew it. That's been well established. One can assume that he was short of funds, but his uncle's death would quickly correct that condition. Having just killed his uncle, he would be falling heir to very considerable funds. He would have no reason for stealing a watch, even a most valuable watch. Some other young man, on the other hand, caught stealing from the firm and confronted with the proof by his employer, might kill Mr. Kingsley. He might murder to escape disgrace and imprisonment, but the murder in his case would represent no alleviation of his financial difficulties. Such a young man might very well steal your watch. For the nephew it would be an act of pure madness. For another young man it could be the understandable addition of crime for profit to crime for escape."

Hortense sighed. "You told the New York police all I told you yesterday?" she asked.

"Quite," said Levering. "They agreed that it was impossible to suspect Dr. Blandy or Mollie's young man or his friend. They did understand, as I do, how it was natural that you should suspect them, but they agree with me that you experienced with your watch one of those

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curious accidents which occasionally do happen."

"It was no accident," Hortense said firmly.

It was Levering's turn to sigh. "I was afraid you'd feel this way," he said. "Your police down in New York told me that I could set your mind at rest, and I told them that would hardly be an easy thing to do, especially now, after that unfortunate business in the surf yesterday afternoon. I realized you would be bound to think that was an attempt on your life."

Hortense flushed. "I am not a hysterical fool," she said heatedly. "Even though you do think so."

Levering made as though he were about to enter some polite demurral, but she swept on past it.

"I did think someone was trying to drown me," she said. "Actually someone did come very close to doing it, but that does not mean that it had to be anything more than a bit of very unwise, very stupid horseplay. I think now it was just that. Either Jim or Blackie ducked me in the surf. Whichever it was, I am certain he is heartily sorry and ashamed and I'd like to drop the matter. I don't care to know which it was."

"They both assure me it wasn't they," Levering told her. "They accuse this other lad, Atterbury. I understand he knows you from New York."

"It was not Mr. Atterbury."

"You are very certain."

"I know Mr. Atterbury only slightly. He is the friend of a friend of mine. I do not much care for Mr. Atterbury, but I am quite certain that ducking me in the surf is the sort of familiarity that would never enter his head."

"Good," said Levering. He seemed much relieved.

"What's good about it?" Hortense asked.

Levering flashed her a placating smile. "I've also talked to Mr. Atterbury," he said. "I have it from him that he is a friend of the friend who suggested you come to the Lodge and that he was present when she suggested it; also that he knew you were here. Since he arrived so shortly before you found your watch and he was on the beach yesterday afternoon, I was very much afraid you might find that he fitted your suspicions all too well, and that would make this task for which the New York police deputized me, the task of setting your mind at rest, so much more difficult."

"It seemed to me, Mr. Levering, that you had taken on that task quite on your own initiative."

"I had, Miss Clinton. Indeed I had. I could see yesterday that you

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were seriously troubled. I most sincerely wanted to help."

"You have been most kind," Hortense answered, "but I'm afraid you haven't helped. I feel that you have given the New York police a rather distorted picture. A young man has been charged with murder, and I am convinced he is innocent. I am not the sort of person whose mind can be set at rest in the face of that."

"Yes," said Levering, "I understand. May I make a suggestion?"

Hortense nodded. "You may make a suggestion," she was thinking, "but I don't have to take it."

"Since you feel as you do, I should suggest that you communicate with the young man's attorneys. You believe you have information which could be useful in his defense. By imparting that information to them you could discharge your duty. I should be glad to obtain for you the name and address of the attorneys who have undertaken his defense."

"That would be kind," Hortense said. She had expected no such suggestion. Abruptly she was not resenting Levering's charm.

He sat awhile and fiddled with the window latch. Hortense sensed that he had something more to say and was seeking a way to say it.

"I think," he began, "Mrs. Evans would like me to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"She is very much upset. She took a most grave view of the episode in the surf yesterday afternoon. That shook her badly. She knew that it had been a close thing, far too close a thing to be taken lightly, even though it did come out as fortunately as it did. Then to have it followed last night by a tragedy that did not come out at all well."

"A tragedy?"

Hortense heard herself echo the words and she knew she was stupidly parroting him, but with the one word he had released all her old fears and added new ones to them.

"Yes," he said. "Mrs. Gadsden had an accident last night."

"Mrs. Gadsden," Hortense gasped. "What happened to her?"

"It was in the storm last night. She was struck by a falling tree."

Hortense rose from her chair and stood trembling before him.

"When?" she whispered. "Where?"

He took her by the hand and led her back to her chair.

"It was a horrible accident," he said gently. "But I want you to know that in its way it was merciful. Death was instantaneous."

Hortense froze. "Death?" she sobbed.

He talked to her gently, soothingly, but she didn't hear. Only slowly did she become aware of him at all, and then it was that he was tugging

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at her, trying to pull her toward the chair. She dropped into it and covered her face with her hands. The man was talking the sort of nonsense people talk at funerals, the sort of thing Hortense herself, feeling fatuous as she wrote it, had from time to time written in polite notes of condolence.

"You mustn't feel too badly," he was saying. "She went as she would have chosen to go."

"Chosen?" Hortense screamed.

"She was a woman of deep religious feeling," Levering answered. "Her deepest pleasure was in service. She practiced her profession with a full sense of devotion, of dedication."

"When did it happen?" Hortense interrupted.

"Early in the evening. Mrs. Evans tells me that Mrs. Gadsden left you to go to dinner. The storm was at its height then. She did not reach the main house. Mrs. Evans questioned the waitresses. Mrs. Gadsden did not come to dinner. Herbert found her later in the evening, after the rain had stopped. He went out to look over the damage and he found her then. It was then that Mrs. Evans made her inquiries."

"Where did he find her? She left here to go to dinner. There was no fallen tree along the path and none along the road. I would have seen a fallen tree this morning."

"She strayed from the path in the storm. She must have been quite turned around. She was between here and the beach. You know your path around the rocks? Apparently she took that by mistake and then, hearing the surf on the rocks even through the storm, she must have known she was wrong and tried to turn back. But she strayed off the path. . . ."

His voice dropped and died away. He was leaving the rest to her imagination and hoping that she would not imagine it too vividly.

Hortense took a hard grip on the arms of her chair. She must be steady now, steady and cool. Now she must make him see it.

"She was wearing my coat and scarf," she said.

"Yes. You understand now why Mrs. Evans didn't know what to answer when you asked about them. I have them in my office. I don't think you'll be wanting them."

Hortense shuddered.

"Never mind about that," she said. "It was a big tree?"

"Yes."

"Many of them down?"

"Many. All along the road between here and town."

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Hortense shook her head. "No," she said, "I don't mean that. I mean here at the Lodge, here near this cabin, near enough so I would hear it go."

"Just that one. Did you hear it?"

"Yes," said Hortense, "I heard it. We both heard it. Mrs. Gadsden was still with me when it went. After that there was nothing, just the wind, dying down."

CHAPTER SEVEN

AGAIN Levering was patient. Again he heard her every argument and he explained her every argument away. Hortense painfully added it up for him. Mrs. Gadsden had come out of Hortense's cabin. Mrs. Gadsden had been wearing Hortense's coat and Hortense's plaid stole. Even in the rain and darkness of the storm that stole would have been recognized. Hortense had been seen in it about the Lodge. It had excited comment. Its great blocks of black and yellow were eye-catching, arresting, unmistakable. In that storm it would have been not at all unlikely that one woman should be mistaken for another. Mrs. Gadsden had been well wrapped in the stole and she could never have been recognized except by the MacLeod tartan. She had been recognized, but mistakenly for Hortense.

"But nobody," Levering objected, "could fell a great tree deliberately and with such precision that it would fall on her as she passed."

"The tree fell before she left me."

"She was crushed under it."

Hortense tried to reason with him. "Don't you see how it was?" she said. "She didn't stray from the path. She didn't even take the wrong path. She took the path to the road and to the main house. She was waylaid on that path by someone who mistook her for me, someone who was lying in wait for me. She was killed on that path, and only after she was dead did her murderer discover that he had killed the wrong woman. He carried her body through the woods to the fallen tree. Somehow he raised the tree enough to push her body under it. He wants you to think it was an accident. It has to seem an accident, because I am still alive and this killer still has his killing to do. He won't stop now. He's going to try again. I know it."

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"But why?"

"My first feeling was right. It wasn't horseplay in the surf yesterday afternoon. He was trying to drown me, but that failed. There were too many people around. Then he tried again last night and he got Mrs. Gadsden by mistake. I saw him last night."

Levering stiffened and then with a visible effort forced himself to to drop back to his customarily casual manner.

"You saw him?"

"Yes," Hortense answered eagerly. "I saw his face and it frightened me, but then I thought it was Herbert and I was being sensible and not letting my imagination run away with me. In a thing like this one can be so sensible that one becomes a fool."

Levering carefully did not comment on this conclusion.

"I'm afraid you have me a bit confused. You saw his face? When? Where?"

"Through the window," Hortense showed him just where. "It was only shortly after Mrs. Gadsden had gone. I saw this face at the window and it frightened me horribly. I lay here waiting for someone to come through the door. Then I heard Herbert out there. He was stamping the wet off his boots and he knocked and came in. I thought it had been he looking in the window to see if I was awake before he knocked, but it wasn't he. There was too long a wait before he did knock, and then he stamped as though he had just fresh come out of the wet. It wasn't Herbert. It was someone else, someone who had just killed Mrs. Gadsden, someone who had just learned that Mrs. Gadsden had been wearing the scarf and not I, someone who had come looking for me, had come to kill me."

"I don't follow that," Levering said quietly. "I take it this face was just a flash at the window. You didn't recognize anyone?"

"No, but it wasn't any delusion. It was a face and it was looking in."

"And you say it was someone who had tried twice in the one day to kill you and had twice failed and was then coming to have a third try."

"It seems to me it was exactly that."

"I don't know. If you are right, why did he just look in and go away?"

Hortense had already thought that out.

"Herbert," she said. "He heard Herbert coming, or he saw his flashlight through the trees. Herbert saved me then, and after that I had visitors all the time — Dr. Blandy and the two boys and Gregg Atterbury and Mrs. Evans. Mrs. Evans sat with me till I was asleep."

"Mrs. Evans sat with you till they called her away because they had

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found Mrs. Gadsden." Levering filled her in.

Hortense nodded eagerly. She felt that he had proved her point.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. It all fits together. When Mrs. Evans left me, it was too late. Then the woods were full of people coming and going because of poor Mrs. Gadsden. The murderer couldn't wait around then. He couldn't get at me then. It was too busy around here the rest of the night, too risky."

"Hmm," said Levering.

For a moment Hortense thought she had made an impression on the man. She waited.

Then there was that patient, indulgent smile again.

"We still stick at the main thing," he said. "There is no sensible reason why anyone should want to kill you. Or can you think of one?"

"I can," said Hortense with all the emphasis she could put into it. "This man went to great trouble and great risk just to return my watch to me, return it as best he could to make it seem that it had never been stolen. I suppose that could have finished it right there. If I had simply been happy to have it back, if I had been ready to believe that I had mislaid it and that by a string of miracles it had been carried up here in my luggage and had finally turned up in my shoe, that would have been the whole of it. But I knew that it couldn't have happened that way. I went to you about it. I wired the New York police. I wired the insurance company."

"I know you sent those wires," Levering interrupted. "Who else does?"

Hortense shrugged. "I saw the girl from the telegraph office. She was very busy telling Herbert in town yesterday. Herbert knows."

"You don't suspect Herbert? You said Herbert scared this other man off, the man who was looking in your window."

"I am guessing that since Herbert knew, everyone else out here at the Lodge probably knew. Herbert is not close-mouthed."

Levering grinned. "I'll grant you that," he said. "He's a garrulous lad."

"He need not have meant any harm, any more than did the girl who told him — although she really shouldn't go about talking about people's telegrams — but it wouldn't be difficult for anyone who really wanted to know. It wouldn't be a bit difficult to learn about those telegrams."

"Yes," Levering conceded. "But, nevertheless, I should think that would convince this man of yours that it was much too late to kill you. You had already done your worst. You had already put your information in the hands of the police."

"And," said Hortense, "the police were unimpressed. No one was in

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the least interested in following up this information of mine. There is a murderer here, Mr. Levering, and he is perfectly safe except for one thing. His one danger is the fact that I am not convinced, that I cannot just let the matter rest. You, for example, suggested that I might communicate with Lawrence Kingsley's attorneys. Why is it not possible that the murderer has also thought I might do that? He might well want to forestall it."

"By murdering you?"

"If a man were trying to escape the consequences of one murder, I should think he would not stop at a second. The second would be a murder without risk. Through it he might get off scot free; and, if he fails, the consequences of two murders are no worse than the consequences of one."

"Obviously, obviously," said Levering. "That was not the point I had in mind. As you picture this affair, we have a murderer and he is worried because you are entertaining suspicions that are dangerous to him. He has in his favor, however, the fact that the police take no stock in your suspicions. He is confronted, therefore, with only the one small danger, the danger that you will succeed in convincing the authorities of your point of view. To remove that small danger you believe that he is ready to incur the far greater danger of involving himself in a fresh murder investigation. Certainly you can see that, as things stand now, there can be nothing more certain to convince me and your police back in the States that there must have been something in what you were telling us than if you were to be murdered." He smiled apologetically, as though he felt he had been unmannerly in even speaking of such a possibility. "Being murdered, Miss Clinton," he said, taking a more jocular tone, "would, of course, be the worst possible thing that could happen to you, but it would be the best possible thing for these arguments that you have been pressing. It would win them just that attention which this putative murderer of yours must most emphatically want that they should not have."

"Quite," said Hortense crisply. "But since I was so foolhardy yesterday as to go into the surf when it was running dangerously high, I might well have drowned in that surf and you would have all felt terribly about this poor fool of a woman who had died of just the sort of accident one would expect. It would have seemed no more than the natural end for a lady who was as careless of her life as she was of her jewelry. You don't deny that, do you?"

Levering sketched in a gallant gesture. "I don't deny," he said, "that

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I should indeed have felt terribly if you had drowned in the surf. We were talking about later, however, about last night, about an attempt on your life then."

Hortense patiently explained the obvious. "Since," she said, "Mrs. Gadsden's death has been made to seem an accident, had it been I and not poor Mrs. Gadsden in my coat and scarf, my death would have looked no less an accident. The picture, as a matter of fact, would have been even better, as well it might have been, since it had been planned for me. I had had a couple of bad shocks, the shock of finding my watch in the morning and the shock of my close call in the surf in the afternoon. Dr. Blandy had given me luminal and put me to bed. However unfortunate, what could have been more natural than that, still muzzy from the luminal, I should have started over to the main house, taken the wrong path, and strayed off into the woods? So far as I can see, there have been no questions about Mrs. Gadsden, and yet there is no reason to believe that Mrs. Gadsden, when she went out into the storm last night, was not in the fullest possession of her faculties."

"And when you saw him at the window?" Levering asked. "He had discovered his mistake and was coming back for you. What do you expect he had in mind to do then, fell another tree and put you under it? I should think the accident quota had been pretty well used up on Mrs. Gadsden."

"Having committed a second murder and having made such a ghastly mistake," Hortense argued, "I would guess that he might have been far from rational when he came to my window. He might have been planning anything then. He would be desperate. I can, though, think of one thing he might have done and it could have passed off quite well as an accident. He might have killed me and dragged me off into the woods to put my body beside Mrs. Gadsden's. Hysterical and in a daze from the luminal, I had run out into the storm and poor Mrs. Gadsden had gone after me to bring me back. We would die together under that falling tree. You wouldn't have found that difficult to believe, would you, Mr. Levering?"

Smiling gently, he made a deprecatory gesture.

"Let us be thankful," he said, "that I am spared the necessity of believing anything of the sort."

Hortense returned the smile. "I am properly grateful," she said. "I would, however, like to keep it that way, if you don't mind."

"We'll keep it that way," he assured her.

"Not by thinking Mrs. Gadsden had an unfortunate accident," Hortense

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said quickly.

Levering sighed. "That brings us back to our basic point of difference," he said. "I see no adequate motive for an attempt on your life. You think about it and you will see that you are exaggerating the importance of your experience with your watch. It's not as though the watch had any real significance in the Kingsley case."

Hortense rose. "I take it, then," she said, "that you still believe that I am in no danger."

"Miss Clinton"—he rose with her—"I am prepared to guarantee your safety."

"What do you expect to do to safeguard it?"

"Trust me. You are in no danger."

Hortense shook her head. "I'm afraid that won't do, Mr. Levering," she said. "I have decided to leave here at once and return to New York."

His face fell and Hortense sensed a breach in what she had taken to be his impregnable poise.

"I can understand your decision," he said. "I should like to be able to tell you that you are quite free to do as you choose, much as we should regret losing you; but I can't do that. I shall have to ask you to remain here for a few days. There are the legal formalities and I shall hurry them as much as I can, of course, but it will be a few days."

"What formalities?"

"Mrs. Gadsden is dead. We shall have to hold a coroner's inquest. You, Miss Clinton, are an essential witness. You are the last person who saw her alive, the last person by a matter of hours."

"Not the last," said Hortense stubbornly.

"There was someone else?" The question was quick, eager.

"Obviously," Hortense answered. "There had to be—the person who killed her."

He smiled that gentle, tolerant smile again.

"Ah yes," he said. "Yes, quite. Person or persons unknown."

"Exactly," said Hortense. "It would seem to me that it's your job to see to it that an essential witness remains alive long enough to testify at the inquest."

Levering laughed. "My dear Miss Clinton," he said, "you shall. I have every intention that you shall. I'm going to ask you to allow me to do something rather highhanded."

"Such as?"

"Move you out of this comfortable cabin into far less attractive accommodations."

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"Where?"

"In the main house. I'll arrange it with Mrs. Evans. There are rooms on the upper floor with balconies overlooking the ocean. They are smaller than this and you won't have your own fire, but otherwise they compare favorably enough."

"And they are less isolated?"

"Precisely. You'll feel so much safer. Face at your window and you need merely sing out. There will be flocks of people."

Hortense nodded. "I think that's an excellent suggestion," she said. "I certainly don't feel safe here any more."

He walked her up to the main house and Mrs. Evans readily arranged the change from the cabin to one of the second-floor rooms. It was put on the basis that Hortense would feel safer where she had close neighbors, and on that basis everybody agreed that it was a sensible arrangement. It was as though they were all trying to make amends to her for failing to share her fears. Herbert and Mollie went back to the cabin with her and helped her pack. Mrs. Evans filled her new room with flowers.

She did not want for attentions. Gregg Atterbury hovered. He insisted on fetching and carrying for her. Jim and Blackie were always about. There were no more solitary walks into town. Manfully, despite their prejudices against going anywhere afoot, they walked with her. She could never go to the beach alone, or to the lake. If they weren't with her, they were near by.

There was also Dr. Blandy — Dr. Blandy and his bottle. Formerly he had ranged freely about the place, reeling happily from guest to guest, finding companions with whom he could sing "Old Soldiers Never Die," finding subjects on whom he could demonstrate his latest operation. Now he seemed to do his reeling in a far narrower circle, a circle of which Hortense was always the center. She became letter-perfect in the words and tune of "Old Soldiers Never Die." She was so often subjected to the demonstration that she came to believe that she would know exactly how to cut her own throat and sew it up again.

Then there was Albert Haines. He arrived at the Lodge in midafternoon and sought her out to tell her that he had abandoned his lodgings in town and that it was his purpose to be close to her as long as she stayed in Nova Scotia.

"I shan't bother you," he said shyly. "You can pretend I'm not even here, if you like. Just let me be always in sight, always in hearing, just in case you should need me."

Hortense was touched. Everybody was always in sight, always in

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hearing, but Albert Haines had moved out from town just to watch over her. She did not want for solicitude, but his solicitude was different and special. The others sought to divert her, to make her feel safe and secure, to set to rest what they gave every evidence of thinking were her hysterical fears and obsessions.

Albert Haines also sought to divert her. He also sought to relieve her of her fears, but he believed her and he agreed with her. He was not trying to bring her relief from any imagined threat, any illusory danger. To him, as to her, the threat and the danger were completely real. He listened to her and he saw it exactly as she did. The episode in the surf had been an attempt on her life. Mrs. Gadsden's death was not accident but murder. The only thing that was accidental about it was the fact that Mrs. Gadsden and not Hortense had gone through the storm in the coat and scarf. The face Hortense had seen at her window had been the murderer's face.

He, like the others, urged her not to think of these things, but the reason he gave her was not because they were unreal but rather because she now would be safe. He would be there always within sight and within hearing and, while he was there, nothing could happen to her. He spoke with such calm purpose, such steady resolution, that Hortense wondered how she could ever have thought him a rather colorless and ineffectual sort of man. In gratitude for the feeling of protection he brought her, she warmed to him.

He alone made her feel truly safe. The others were attentive. They were watching over her. The others, however, did not believe in the danger. Obvious as it was, transparent as were the ruses, the others had all been fooled by them, fooled into thinking that it had been merely childish horseplay in the surf, fooled into believing that Mrs. Gadsden had gone astray in the woods and had been felled by the falling tree, fooled into assuming that no real threat hovered over the head of Hortense Clinton. So far the killer had been clever. Not clever enough, perhaps, to deceive her or Albert Haines, but quite clever enough to deceive the police and all the others. She felt that she would delude herself as they were deluded if she for a moment allowed herself to believe that this killer who for his own mysterious reasons was so implacably seeking her life should abruptly turn clumsy or stupid. She had to expect that he would be as clever in his next move as he had been previously, and surely that was likely to be clever enough to take her right out from under the noses of these men who surrounded her with an appearance of protection. That, she told herself, was all they had to offer, just the appearance of

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protection. Albert Haines, with his every suspicion alerted, would be more difficult to deceive.

They were never really alone. Even at such times as some of the others were not with them, they were always visible, hovering in the offing. Hortense began to wonder about that. They were a strange quartet, and one of the four was the killer. The question was which. Everybody had explained Dr. Blandy. Mollie had explained Jim and Blackie. Hortense herself eliminated Gregg Atterbury. That slick young man might well have lost out in New York. With Maud it was always one slick young man or another, and now it might be another. Hortense knew about Maud's young men. Maud liked having them about. She even liked to think that one day she might marry one of them, but it always came to the same thing in the end. There were those who were simply content to hang about, and that sort boggled as soon as there was any indication that Maud might be thinking of marriage. Hortense could no longer count the number of times one of these pretty youths had sheered off and Maud's heart had been broken. It was a comic business, because Maud had also been involved with the other type. Hortense guessed Gregg Atterbury to be one of the other type. They had their eye on the main chance. Maud was a rich woman, a rich woman alone in the world. For a young man with an itch for quick prosperity Maud might be a career. Several young men had at one time or another tried to make themselves such a career, and at that point Maud had always boggled. Belatedly her good common sense would intervene. Heartbrokenly she would tell Hortense of some little incident, some word or gesture, that had opened her eyes, had shown her that Jack or Steve or Cecil or Harry had never been truly devoted to her, that he had merely been after her money. Each time the discovery would again break her heart, and each time, grimly and firmly, she would send the young man packing.

They didn't reform and take up honest toil and they didn't go off and blow their brains out. They bobbed up again immediately, with their smooth gloss unimpaired, and attached themselves to the train of some other woman who had more money than sense. Hortense had seen it happen again and again. She could guess that it might have happened to Gregg Atterbury, and she was not particularly flattered by the thought that he might have picked her as Maud's successor.

In that way, however, he could be explained, but in his case the explanation was surplus. Hortense knew where he had been the night Everett Kingsley had been murdered. He had seen Maud home from Hortense's party, and even if he had disposed of that necessary courtesy as quickly

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as possible, he still would not have had enough time to return to the house, enter Everett Kingsley's apartment, murder the old man, and ransack the apartment before coming out to surprise her in the service hall. Of that Hortense was certain.

And for the other three there were explanations, explanations that divorced them conclusively from any connection with her watch, the death of Everett Kingsley, her near drowning in the surf, Mrs. Gadsden's accident that was no accident. For one of them the explanation had to be false. Hortense discussed them with Albert Haines and together they wondered.

The explanation for Dr. Blandy he was inclined to accept.

"You can back that up with your own experience of him," he said. "He took care of you when they pulled you out of the water. He gave you a sedative. If Dr. Blandy was the one, that was his big chance. Why didn't he take it? He's a doctor. He could have given you something that would have killed you, even an overdose of what he did give you; but he took proper care of you. That eliminates him. This man misses no chances, and he wouldn't miss a chance like that."

Hortense argued the point. "He didn't miss any chances," she said. "But he doesn't take any wild chances, either. I was only a hair away from drowning yesterday afternoon. If he had hung on for only a few moments longer, I should have been gone. But he didn't. He let go. He let go because the others were coming and he was willing to wait for another chance, a safer chance. It could have been Dr. Blandy—too cautious to go through with the drowning once he saw the others were near, too cautious to give me something when they brought me back to the cabin."

"But that would have been safe, safer than anything," Haines insisted. "He's a doctor. He was the doctor in attendance. They like him up here. They believe in him, even though he is drunk most of the time. You'd just had a narrow squeak, a bad shock. Suppose you had died last night. He would have made out the death certificate. Heart failure, shock. Who would have questioned him?"

They were sitting in the big downstairs lounge at the main house. Gregg Atterbury had planted himself across the room with a magazine and was pretending to read. It was a poor pretense. He kept stealing glances at Hortense around the edges of the magazine. Dr. Blandy had been loitering by the stairs, apparently in muzzy idleness. Now he was wandering off, and Blackie and Jim had come in and were dragging a bridge table out of the big cylindrical compartment that was the core to

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the spiral staircase and had been a laundry chute. They settled down to play gin rummy.

Hortense watched Dr. Blandy shamble off upstairs and she caught her breath sharply.

"Albert," she whispered, "you've just said something. If it was Dr. Blandy, then Mrs. Gadsden couldn't have been a mistake. He knew she was with me. He knew that I'd be in no shape to get up and come over here to dinner, or that even if I were, I would never be coming alone, that she would be with me. If it had been Dr. Blandy outside waiting his chance he would have known that if only one of us came out of the cabin, it would have to be Mrs. Gadsden, no matter what she wore. He wouldn't have killed her by mistake."

Haines nodded. "That's another point," he agreed. "I think you can eliminate Dr. Blandy."

"No," said Hortense. "It's just the other way around. You asked who would have questioned him if I had died last night and he had signed a death certificate that called it heart failure or shock. There was just one person up here who did not believe in him, just one person who knew him and didn't trust him. It was Mrs. Gadsden. She was a nurse. She had been on at least one of his cases. She didn't like him and he didn't like her. She was there. She was watching him. He had to be rid of her. He did all the right things a doctor would do, but she was there and watching him. He wouldn't dare do anything else. Don't you see, if it was Dr. Blandy who killed her, he would have done it not because he had mistaken her for me but because he had to have her out of the way first? He didn't dare make another move against me until he had eliminated her."

Haines sighed. "Yes," he conceded, "I see what you mean." He brooded awhile, watching Blackie and Jim at their gin rummy. "As a matter of fact," he resumed, "none of the explanations are really any good. We can't eliminate anybody. That pair at the card table, for instance, just look at them."

Hortense looked at them. They looked much as they always looked, young and fresh and full of mischievous good spirits, as though they had their heads together over some hilarious prank. As usual, they just missed being identically dressed. Blackie wore a blue cashmere sweater over a tan shirt. Jim's tan cashmere sweater was pulled on over a blue shirt.

"They're quite mad," she said, "in a harmless sort of way."

Haines raised a doubtful eyebrow. "Harmless?" he asked.

"Both of them doing the courting for one," she explained. "It's fantastic,

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but I'd say it was harmless enough."

"If that's what they are doing up here," Haines said darkly. "I don't know why the girl should tell you that elaborate story for them, but don't you think it's a pretty strange courtship where the two of them, supposed to be courting her together, neglect her together? I haven't seen them work at it at all, have you?"

Hortense was shaken. In trying to convince him, she was really trying to convince herself. The boys were likable. She had never really wanted to think anything else of them. Also the strain had been telling on her. She could not go on indefinitely being wary of them all.

"It wasn't only that she explained them," Hortense protested. "She explained so many other things—Mrs. Evans' attitude toward them, some of the things Mr. Levering said that first time I spoke to him."

"Yes, except that she could have told her aunt and Levering the same story she told you."

"But why? Why would she?"

Haines shrugged. "If we had one answer," he said, "we'd probably have them all. It's better for you not to ask."

Hortense was startled. "I wouldn't dream of asking her," she said.

Haines smiled at her sympathetically. "That isn't what I meant," he said gently. "It would be better for you not to ask, period. Just simply that. You should be trying to believe what Levering believes. You should be trying to forget the whole thing. Take it as accidents, coincidences, and let everyone see that you are taking it that way. Don't try to find out. Why should you take all this on yourself? All this worry and danger. Drop it. Accept it. Don't ask any questions. Don't suggest any doubts. Let the police do their own work. It's the only way you can really be safe."

In her heart Hortense knew how much she wanted to take this sensible advice, and in her heart she knew that she couldn't.

"There's the young man down in New York," she said. "He's going to be tried for his uncle's murder. I can't let it rest."

Haines sighed and, pulling himself together, he rested his hand gently on the back of hers. Gently he squeezed her hand.

"Yes," he said softly. "Of course you can't. I do wish you could. For my sake as well as your own, because I am fond of you. I think you know that, but I suppose one of the reasons why I am so fond of you is because of this sense of justice of yours and because of your courage. I can't very well ask that you should be different when I admire you for what you are. Can I now?"

Hortense flushed. "You're very sweet," she said.

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"Nonsense," he answered. "We have to be practical. We accept it. You can't let it rest, and that's going to be all right, too, because you have me and I'll be watching. But the question now is what are we going to do about it. We can't just go on sitting here and waiting for this killer to strike at you. We have to do something and I don't have the first idea."

"I do," said Hortense as she rose. "I have some very good ideas."

Gregg Atterbury set down his magazine and yawned elaborately, as though he wanted everyone to know that he was tired of reading. Jim and Blackie laid their cards on the table and reached for their cigarettes.

Hortense walked across the lounge to the desk. Haines was at her side, and she knew that Atterbury and the two boys at the card table were watching them. Alongside the desk was a telephone booth. Hortense slid into the booth and, while Haines stood in the doorway, screening her from the watching eyes, she got long distance and asked for Maud's number in New York.

"Who are you calling?" Haines whispered.

"A friend. The friend who suggested I come here. I'm going to try to find out who suggested it to her, who used her to send me here."

"You met Atterbury through her?"

Hortense nodded.

"Be careful," he whispered. "Don't forget the way they are here about telephones and telegraph. The operators listen in. There's no such thing as a private call. Remember, when you sent those wires, the girl from the telegraph office."

"I know," said Hortense. "That can't be helped. I have to have the answer to some of these questions."

"You'll be careful?" Haines repeated.

"I'll be careful," Hortense promised.

When they had put her through to Maud, she did try to be careful. She did her best to make it sound as though on an impulse she had called an old friend in New York just for a bit of gossip.

Maud asked how she was feeling.

"Fine," said Hortense. "Just fine. Heaven only knows why."

"Whatever do you mean? Isn't it lovely up there?"

"I suppose it is," said Hortense. "Yes. Of course it is. It's just that I've been too busy to notice."

Maud giggled. "Busy," she shrilled. "You're holding out on me. It's a man, of course."

"Men," said Hortense.

"Exciting?" For Maud the adjective always went with the noun.

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"Too exciting for me," Hortense answered. "I've had more things happening to me up here. First of all, I found my watch."

"What watch?"

"The one I was wearing that night. You know."

"Your watch with the diamonds? But I thought that Kingsley boy, the one who murdered his uncle, I thought he stole it."

Hortense sighed. "It seems he didn't," she said. "I've been completely dizzy with trying to understand it, but it seems I just lost it and found it again and it's just one of those miracles." She explained the miracle.

"That is luck," said Maud. "But tell me about the men."

Hortense laughed. "If you want men to be attentive," she said, "I've found a way. I nearly drowned yesterday."

"Are you crazy?"

"I suppose I am. I went into the surf and it was much too rough for me, and I almost did drown except that a couple of men pulled me out and all the others flocked around, and I've had every man in the place taking care of me ever since. I've never seen anything like it."

"Oh, that," said Maud. "That way? It doesn't sound very exciting."

"If you mean fun, I haven't been having much. I'm not at all sure I'm grateful to you for giving me the idea of coming up here. It's been rather exhausting really, and some of it has been most unpleasant. There was a ghastly accident last night and a woman was killed. She was a rather sweet old thing and she'd borrowed my coat and scarf because it was storming and she had to go through the rain and she was hit by a falling tree. It was horrible."

"Well, really," said Maud defensively, "you're not going to pretend it's my fault. I'm not responsible for acts of God, am I?"

Hortense assured her she was not.

"By the way," she said, changing the subject as casually as she could, "I've been trying to think of the last name of that man who comes here all the time. You know, the one who told you about it. Bill — Bill — Bill what?"

"Why?" Maud asked sharply. "Is he up there?"

"How would I know, dear? I can't recall his last name."

"Blandy," said Maud. "Bill Blandy. You know, he's that wonderful surgeon. You know."

"Did I ever meet him?"

Maud went vague. "Oh, you must have," she said. "One time or another with me. It's impossible you haven't."

"I don't think I have, because there is this Dr. Blandy up here now

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and I'm sure I've never met him before."

"Then he is there," Maud shouted. "Give him my love."

"I'll do that," said Hortense. "When did you last see him?"

Maud went vaguer. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "Not since you left town."

"Before that?"

"Yes."

"How long before?"

"I don't know." Maud sounded impatient. "What difference does it make?"

"None, I suppose. But he has been most attentive and I was wondering if possibly you had told him I was going to be up here or something like that."

"Heavens, no," said Maud. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. It's just that he has been so attentive."

Maud sniffed. "Don't give it a thought," she said with poorly concealed malice. "That's Bill Blandy, he's that way with everyone. Tomorrow he won't even remember he's met you. If you knew him as well as I do. . ."

Hortense did want to tell Maud that this Bill Blandy of hers had flatly denied knowing her, but she knew it would be pointless. It could only make Maud angry, and from Maud's anger there would be no way for Hortense to learn whether Blandy had deliberately lied when he had said he knew no Maud Sellers or whether it was Maud who was lying, boastfully building some casual old meeting with the man into a tale of another admirer. It was a question Hortense did not know how to ask.

"I don't especially want to know him," she said instead. "Seen Gregg lately?"

Maud chuckled complacently. "Gregg," she said. "You know how he is. It's all I can do to get away from him even for a little while. Sometimes I have to actually push him off just so I can get an hour to have my hair done."

"I was wondering if you knew that he's come up here."

"Gregg?" It was a scream of pure outrage followed by a long, throbbing silence.

"He turned up yesterday, all surprise, surprise. Didn't he tell you he was coming?"

Maud sniffed. "If you want Gregg Atterbury, Hortense," she said, "you can have him and I'll love you forever for taking him off my hands."

"Good heavens," Hortense interjected, "I don't want him! Neither of us wants him."

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Maud wasn't hearing. She went right on.

"I think you've both behaved horribly," she stormed. "All that hole-in-the-corner nonsense, as though I would care, as though you couldn't have simply told me. I remember very well that night. It was too, too transparent. Gregg getting me to take him along to your place, just as though you hadn't asked him."

"But I hadn't," Hortense protested. "You brought him and he took you home."

"Well, really," Maud raged. "Of course he took me home. Wasn't that the least he could do? Would you have had him let me go home alone?"

"No need to be angry about it," said Hortense.

"I'm not angry," Maud shouted, sounding very angry indeed. "I'm just terribly hurt, hurt that you should both think I'm such a fool. Let me tell you, Hortense Clinton, you're the fool. I wasn't born yesterday. I know a thing or two. I know just what he's thinking of, barging off this way and not a thought for his job or anything. He's going to expect you to make him a very nice settlement. Just mark my words."

"He's going to be disappointed," said Hortense, and hung up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the evening the wind rose again and howled through the woods. With the wind came rain, slashing, driving rain, and the night was full of noises. Hortense knew them for what they were, the ordinary noises of the storm. They didn't frighten her but they did upset her. It was too soon. Every sound of wind and rain served to remind her of Mrs. Gadsden. She found the words repeating themselves in her mind again and again — wind and water — just as Mrs. Gadsden would say them. Her thoughts were beyond bearing.

All evening Jim and Blackie were up to their tricks with that unused cylindrical laundry chute around which curved the spiral staircase. They would sneak into its hollow chamber and hoot and wail, and they made the whole of the main house horrible by adding their own magnified banshee cries to the crying of the wind and the rain. Hortense was in no mood to find them amusing, and pleading a headache, she went to her room. She kicked off her shoes and propped herself up on her bed to read. The rain whipped the balcony outside her window and beyond it she could

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hear the solid rhythm of the pounding surf.

She read a long time and finally dropped off to sleep over her book. It was a restless sleep full of unshaped dreams, dreams that had in them the sounds of the night and Mrs. Gadsden dead in the wet woods and Maud screaming over the telephone. She woke abruptly and the sounds were there in waking as they had been in sleep. She tried to hear past them to the sounds of the house, and it seemed to her that the house was completely quiet, quiet as it would be when it was very late and everyone was asleep. She glanced at the traveling clock on the table beside her bed. It was past twelve and she began to think of undressing.

In an interval of the wind, she heard a new sound. She froze against her pillows and held her breath in an agony of listening. In the medley of night sounds she had caught this other sound, a closer, a more insistent sound. She waited and it came again, a little tapping noise at her balcony door. She thought of branches swinging in the wind, beating their twig ends against the wall, but then she remembered that had been in the cabin. Here the woods were around the other side of the house. Her balcony overlooked the beach. There were no trees.

"I can scream and people will come," she thought. "That's why Levering had me moved here, so I could scream."

Remembering that renewed her courage. She had been ready to scream even as she had carried in her imagination a picture of herself screaming futilely, unheard, as Mrs. Gadsden might have screamed in the woods the night before. Now that she remembered that if she screamed she would be heard, she was ready to tell herself not to be silly, there was nothing to scream about.

Again she heard the tapping. Softly, stealthily, she slid from the bed and walked in her stocking feet to the balcony door. The tapping was steady, insistent, and with it came a tense whisper.

"Miss Clinton, Miss Clinton."

"Who's there?" she called.

Her voice seemed to echo in the quiet house.

"Shh," came the whisper. "Be very quiet."

"Who are you?"

Hortense wondered why she, too, should be whispering, but she did.

"Haines," she heard. And then: "Insurance company."

Haines. Albert Haines. She drew back the bolt and stepped away from the door. He opened it and came in. She was taken aback by the change in the man. Everything that was tentative about him—everything indecisive or mousy—was gone. He did nothing startling, just came

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into the room and silently shut the door behind him, but his movements seemed so completely controlled, so athletic. He looked lithe and strong and exciting.

"I'm fluttered," she thought. "Like a schoolgirl at the movies. The silly man is gotten up as the Count of Monte Cristo."

She tried to laugh at herself, or at him, but it wouldn't work. She was taking it in, item by item, and calling it theatrical, but despite herself she believed it. Part of it was the way he was dressed — black trousers and a black sweater and noiseless, rubber-soled shoes, a costume for slipping silently through the darkness to do deeds of daring. The rest of it was his manner — assured, commanding, definite.

She started to speak but he laid his hand lightly over her mouth. With his free hand he brought from his pocket a little black memorandum book with an attached pencil. He pressed it into her hand.

With his lips close to her ear, he whispered. "Don't talk," he told her. "There's someone right outside your door."

Hortense stared at him in amazement and then looked toward the balcony door. He shook his head and pointed to the other door, the door to the hall.

He wrote rapidly in the little black book and handed it to her.

"I want you to leave quietly with me," he wrote. "We'll go by the balcony. I must talk to you."

Hortense took the book from him.

"Who are you?" she wrote.

He brought out his wallet and, flipping it open, handed it to her. He was showing her his identification. Carefully Hortense read it. It was the right insurance company and he was their accredited investigator. Slowly she took it in. He also handed her, to read, his letter of instructions signed by her old friend in the company, Duane Brewster. She blushed as she read it. Duane had been flattering, even fulsome, in his characterization of her as a rarely levelheaded and responsible person who was to be watched carefully, not because there could ever be the slightest doubt of any claim she might put in but because she might be in grave personal danger. This was all too confusing. She had had Albert Haines so completely catalogued. He had been the timid admirer, the good listener, the mousy and methodical and basically uncertain man. He had tried to play the plumed knight on the white charger ready to break a lance in her defense, but he had never quite achieved the white charger and the plumes had never suited him. He had been protective, but the lance had never been quite his style. His protection had been more in the line of

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wrapping a plaid stole around her throat, and, if it had been she instead of Mrs. Gadsden who had worn it in the woods, she might be dead.

She shuddered away from that thought. There was confusion enough, without now blunting her wits with that much chewed-over horror. She had to adjust to this new Albert Haines, an Albert Haines who looked formidable and even menacing in his black sweater and his black trousers and his noiseless shoes. It was almost a uniform, and it gave him a romantic and a somehow sinister look. Hortense had to remind herself that it was a practical costume, that it was anything but romantic, that it fitted the new Albert Haines, the man of action, the decisive man, the man who pursued a dangerous trade and moved competently among its dangers.

He was writing in the little book. She read over his shoulder as he wrote.

"We can't talk here without being overheard," she read. "I have to tell you about my arrangements for you. I don't want to scare you, but your life depends on your understanding these arrangements. We'll go by the balcony. There's nobody in the lounge downstairs. We'll talk down there."

His pencil stopped and he looked into her eyes. His eyes were no longer vague. They were assured and assuring. They commanded confidence. He was waiting for her answer. Hortense nodded, and flashing her a quick smile, he took her hand and started leading her toward the balcony door. They moved silently, she in her stocking feet and he on his rubber soles. At the balcony door she pulled away and, pointing at her feet, started back for her slippers. He put his hand out and stopped her. Swiftly he glided across the room and took up not her slippers but her shoes. Carrying them for her, he led her out to the balcony and softly shut the door behind them.

Outside the wind snatched at them and the surf thundered. They couldn't talk without shouting. He held her firmly by the hand and led her along. The balconies were in actuality one long gallery divided by low railings, railings so low that they constituted merely a token division. They moved silently along this gallery, stepping over the low railings. They moved slowly, and at each railing he helped her. Hortense marveled at the completeness of his disguise. The Albert Haines she had known had even had a different touch. She could remember the way he would take her arm to help her over the cobblestones in the village. His touch then had been tentative, half apologetic. Now his grip was steady, solid, authoritative. At the end of the gallery he stooped swiftly and slipped her shoes on for her. Then he led her down the outside

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stairs and, by the front door, into the big downstairs lounge.

It seemed deathly quiet in there after the noise of the storm outside. There was only one light burning, a dim one over the spiral stairs. It lit little more than the stairs and the curving wall of the big cylinder where the bridge tables were stored. On the broad grate the fire had died down to a glowing bed of embers, and in the darkness of the big lounge this fire glow seemed to cast more light than did the lamp over the stairs. Now he didn't whisper but he did speak softly.

"Miss Clinton," he said crisply, "you are going to have to trust me. Your life depends on trusting me completely and implicitly. That's why I identified myself to you. We've been lucky so far, but the time's running out. It was just luck last night that it was Mrs. Gadsden and not you." He smiled wryly. "Luck of a sort," he said. "Not at all lucky for her, of course. Your old cabin is empty. I'm going to take you there. You'll sleep there tonight and I'll be on the porch. There's a man in the corridor outside your room, waiting. I don't know which of them it is, but there's someone there. I can't get up there to see without being seen, and I don't want to give my own hand away, but sometime during the night he'll come into your room and find it empty. I'd like to be there when he comes, but that's too dangerous. I can't leave you by yourself in the cabin. We'll do it the other way. I'll be on the cabin porch. If no one comes, then we'll have you through the night safely. If anyone comes, I'll have him."

He said it all matter-of-factly, as though this sort of thing were all in the day's work. Hortense reminded herself that for this Albert Haines it would be all in the day's work. The words, however, even spoken calmly as he spoke them, were horrible. "If anyone comes, I'll have him." Hortense shuddered. Suddenly she felt chilled. She moved toward the dying fire. He guessed her feelings and went to the fire with her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I hadn't planned on all this melodrama. I thought I had a better way of handling this. Your watch was stolen. It was returned. You wouldn't believe you had lost it and found it again, but you had no really good explanation for why anyone should steal it and return it. Then began these attempts on your life. There's only one explanation for them. You know something, Miss Clinton, or at least you can be presumed to know something. This killer, anyhow, is afraid that you do know it, whatever it is. Perhaps it's something you don't remember but might still remember if you think about it. He returned your watch because he hoped that when you had your watch back you would stop thinking about it, but you haven't stopped thinking about it and everybody

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knows you haven't. That's why the attempts on your life. As long as you are alive you might remember. I have been hoping that you would remember and that you'd tell me. I thought I could take if from there and I'd have our man; but you haven't told me anything that really helps. There has to be something else."

Hortense began to say that she had already told him everything, everything she knew and everything she remembered. They were standing on the flagstoned hearth, close to the fire screen, and Hortense had been staring into the fire. She turned to look at him before she spoke. She wanted to look straight into his eyes. She wanted him to believe her, to know she trusted him. As her gaze moved from the fire, however, she did not immediately raise it. She held it fixed on the flagstones at their feet.

Something familiar had caught her eye and held it. Even in the moment before understanding followed what she saw, there came the little warning thrill of fear. She couldn't look into this man's eyes. She must be careful, most careful, that he didn't look into hers. He was skillful at dissembling, diabolically skillful, but she was not. She could not take the risk that he might read and accurately assess what she had in her eyes.

On the flagstones where they stood were the prints left by a man's wet shoes. He had come in to her out of the wet and, coming down the open stairs from the protected gallery, they had both been in the wet. She moved her feet and saw the wet prints of her own shoes, but he was standing quite still waiting for her answer. She forced herself to hold steady. If he had been so still all along, if he had not moved his feet sometime while he was talking to her and her eyes were on the fire, she would have trusted him. He had himself spoken of her luck, and on so small a thing as that her luck was riding.

She studied the wet print that looked so big and broad beside her own, but she knew she wasn't mistaken. Here it was, just as he had said not a moment before— the thing that she might remember if she thought hard enough and long enough, the dangerous thing. The heel of that wet shoe print was notched with a chevron pattern, just as she had seen it marked in dust on the seat of the broken kitchen chair. The same chevron pattern, the same shoe, the same man.

"Of course I trust you," she said without raising her eyes. "I've told you every last thing I know. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," he answered.

His voice was soft and calm as before, but Hortense was certain that she was not merely imagining that it had hardened abruptly and that

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now it had in it a trace of suppressed anger.

"If you've nothing more to tell me," he said, "then we'll have to go to the cabin."

He took her arm and started drawing her toward the door.

She drew back. "I can't go this way in the storm," she said. "Without a wrap, I'll be drenched before we get there and I'll take my death of cold. It won't do me much good to have you save me from murder if I am to die of pneumonia instead."

He dropped her arm and stood for a moment, thinking. "Nobody knows you're out of your room," he said. "For now you'll be safe down here. I'll nip up to the balconies again and I'll get you a coat from your room. Wait here for me and be perfectly quiet."

Hortense nodded and watched him glide off silently to the front door. Once he'd stepped out of the glow of the fireplace, he almost disappeared in the darkness of the vast room. She had to strain her eyes to watch him to the door. He stepped out into the storm and shut the door behind him. She was going to scream. That much she had planned. She would wait, wait long enough for him to make it all the way up to her room, and then she would scream. That would be the time, because then he would be too far from her to do anything before help came. There would be others nearer then, all those wonderful others — Blackie and Jim and Dr. Blandy and Herbert and even Gregg Atterbury.

It was all coming clear in a rush. He had bought her that loud yellow-and-black scarf. He had wheedled out of her every confidence. To him she had told all her suspicions. He had wheedled them from her. Even at the last he had tried again, tried to find out how much she knew, how much she remembered, and when she had said she remembered nothing more, his voice had hardened. He hadn't believed her.

She couldn't expect him to believe her, and now that she understood, she knew that she couldn't expect that he would be ready to let her live. Not when it was so simple, when it was so inevitable that, as she thought about it, it would sooner or later piece itself together properly. The broken chair had stood in front of the refrigerator, and by the electric clock over the refrigerator it had been a little before two when she had gone to set the milk bottles out. By her watch, however, when her guests had gone, it had been a little after two. Time hadn't turned backward. The indications had all been too small, too trifling — the chair in front of the refrigerator, the heelprint on the chair that meant someone had been standing on it, the electric clock over the refrigerator, the drip pan she'd had to empty even though when she had checked it the motor of the

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refrigerator had been going, the light in the service hall out.

The heelprint brought them all into focus, made them click together. When she had come into her kitchen her refrigerator was working and her clock was running, but at some time previously the current had been off in her kitchen, off long enough for the refrigerator to start defrosting itself and for the electric clock to lose that interval of time. A man had gone into her neighbor's apartment, bent on killing. He had had to be certain of darkness in the apartment for the work he had wanted to do. He had assured darkness by removing the fuses from the fuse box in the service hall. He had removed one fuse too many and had cut off the power in her kitchen.

It was all there — the whole story. A man comes to kill. He enters a lighted apartment. One undrawn shade can be fatal to his plans. He removes the fuses and guarantees for himself an unlighted apartment. If his quarry is awake, he will come to the service hall to check the fuse box and he will die there. If he is asleep, he will not come and the murderer enters the apartment, does his killing in the dark, creeps about, checks every shade, draws any that weren't drawn, goes back to the service hall, replaces the fuses — all but the one for the light in the service hall, because he might just as well have an unlighted hall for his exit — returns to the apartment, and behind the drawn shades turns on all the lights he wants for ransacking the place. He sets the dead man's watch ahead to a time for which he will later establish an alibi, and he finds what he has come for. Then, as he leaves, he finds a neighbor in the service hall. Before she can raise her head, he knocks her unconscious and takes the watch from her wrist. This woman can spoil his alibi if she regains consciousness and checks the time before that movement at which he stopped the dead man's watch. Without a watch on her wrist, there will be a longer interval before she can check the time, a better margin for him, and her missing watch will make the police look for a common thief. It was desperation thinking, that part of it, but the murderer would have been improvising then.

The next day he discovers from the newspapers that his improvisation was better than he knew. The neighbor has placed the time of the crime unaccountably early, early enough to bring about the arrest of the dead man's nephew. He looks for an explanation and the explanation comes to him. It lies in the fuses he removed. If the lady had checked the time on an electric clock before she opened her kitchen door, then she had checked the time by a clock that was in error, a clock that had been stopped during the interval when the fuses were out. The lady is in the hospital.

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He need only get into her kitchen before she comes home, need only climb up to the electric clock to move the hands ahead to the right time, and he's safe. The time of the crime will be fixed as she had placed it, early enough to throw it on the dead man's nephew. She need only have been fooled by the return of her watch and this man Haines would have been safe. Lawrence Kingsley would have died for his uncle's murder, and Haines would have been safe.

She did not dare follow the thought of how Haines might have come by his credentials and Duane Brewster's letter. Had there been a genuine representative of the company sent to watch over her, and had this man killed him and stolen his papers?

A great rage mounted in her. She would have to scream, and then, when she told the police this story, would they believe her any more than they had before? She would have to make them believe her. Much as she would like to go with him to the cabin, to trap him even as he would try to murder her tonight, she knew that all such thoughts were foolhardy. She would have to scream.

She moved toward the stairs and gathered her breath, but instead of screaming, she let it go in a long sigh as Blackie and Jim came trotting down the stairs, wheeling nimbly around the curve of the spiral. She ran toward them and met them at the foot of the stairs. For a moment she felt weak with relief and she leaned against the wall of the hollow cylinder around which the stairs curved.

"What makes?" the boys whispered. "What are you doing down here? We've been standing guard on your door. We just left Dr. Blandy up there."

A wild elation seized her. She would trap Albert Haines after all. This time the police would have to believe her. In a hurried whisper she poured it at the kids.

"In a minute," she said, "Albert Haines will be here. I'm going with him to my old cabin. He's going to try to kill me there. I have a plan to trap him."

"Hey," Blackie interrupted. "I don't dig you."

"Dig me later," Hortense snapped. "You go outside and watch the door. Keep out of sight, and when we start for the cabin, follow us. Don't let us get so far ahead that you can't dive in and help me the minute he attacks me, but wait for him to show his hand." She turned to Jim. "You go get all the help you can round up and come through the woods to join Blackie outside the cabin. I know what I'm doing."

The boys hesitated.

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"What do you think, Bud?" Jim asked.

"I don't know, Bud," said Blackie.

"I recognized him tonight." Hortense, in her eagerness, forgot to whisper. She spoke out. "We came in out of the wet and I saw the print of his shoe on the hearth. I saw the print of the murderer's shoe back in New York. They are the same."

"The lady knows what she's doing," said Blackie and trotted off to the front door.

"I'll bring up the reserves," said Jim and raced up the stairs.

In a moment they were both gone and Hortense slumped against the cylindrical wall, relaxing, gathering her strength for the ordeal she had undertaken. Haines would be back at any moment, and she was setting herself to play along when he came. She stared through the dimness toward the front door, waiting for him. She didn't hear the door open behind her, the door to the cylinder, to the old laundry chute. The heavy hand was down tight across her mouth and nose, smothering her, before she could make an outcry, before she even knew that there was any need for her to cry out. She was caught fast. An arm clamped around her waist and she was lifted off her feet and pulled backward, back from the foot of the stairs, back through the door into the great pitch-black hollow of the laundry chute.

Haines had gone out the front door. She had seen him go. Blackie had gone the same way. Jim had raced upstairs. The hand came off her mouth and the firm grasp around her waist slackened. With a great sob she sucked in her breath to scream, but the breath was only half drawn when both hands closed around her throat. They choked off the scream. They tightened and pressed cruelly. These would be the hands, and this would be the way they had tightened about the throat of Everett Kingsley. This was it. This was the end. She struggled, but her strength was going and she could do little. She could only think, think futilely and too late.

Not Haines, not Jim, not Blackie. Who was left? Dr. Blandy? Gregg Atterbury?

It hadn't been the print of Haines's shoe on the hearth. That print had been left by someone who had come into the lounge before them, by someone who had heard them coming and had slipped into the laundry chute to wait and listen. This man now had his hands about her throat — she had erased his last doubt. She had herself spoken the words that were to kill her. She had told him that she had seen the print of his shoe and had recognized it.

Her guests had gone after two. Her kitchen clock at that time con-

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siderably later, just before she put out the milk bottles, had shown some minutes before two. There was still this one last detail, and why hadn't she seen it in time? In the flickering light of her fast-fading consciousness she saw it now. But now it was too late.

It was her last thought, and that last thought ran into her first and merged with it. She came up from the dark into an awareness of the soreness of her throat and, thinking "too late," she summoned her strength to pull the hands away. There were no hands, and she opened her eyes to find Haines and Dr. Blandy bent over her.

"Atterbury," she whispered. "Gregg Atterbury. He went out to my bathroom to be sick, but he wasn't. He didn't. He went next door instead and killed Mr. Kingsley and pulled the fuses. My clock stopped before two. He was there. He stopped it."

"Don't try to talk now," Dr. Blandy told her.

"Atterbury," she insisted.

Haines grinned at her. "We've got him," he said.

He stepped aside so she could see. They did have him. He stood pinioned between Jim and Blackie while Levering fitted the handcuffs to his wrists.

She had a thousand questions to ask, but Dr. Blandy wouldn't let her speak. He did let her listen, however, and between them Haines and Levering answered her unspoken questions.

Levering confessed that at first he had thought she was a hysterical woman but that after Mrs. Gadsden's death he had known he'd been mistaken. There had never been any doubt that Mrs. Gadsden had been murdered. She had been strangled with the plaid scarf, and although her head had been battered in, that had not been done until after she was dead. Then her body had been carried to the fallen tree and shoved under it. It had been a clumsy job, a job that might have seemed good to a city man, but Levering was no city man and he'd seen through it. He was enough the woodsman to read the trail over which the body had been carried.

"It was murder," Levering said, "and I knew then that you'd been right from the first. I had two possibilities, though — Haines and Atterbury. I phoned New York for a check on both of them, but I wanted to keep you safe till I had my check. I almost failed. I had the check tonight. Atterbury worked for Everett Kingsley. As soon as I'd had the word I started out here. I couldn't telephone. The storm brought the Lodge telephone line down. I met Blackie out front. He was whispering your plan to me when all hell broke loose inside. We came in and it sounded as

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though the laundry chute were going to burst its seams. Jim and Dr. Blandy and Atterbury were all tangled up together in there and you looking as though you were dead. Believe me, that was quite a moment."

Hortense wanted to ask how Jim and Dr. Blandy had found her in time, but she had to wait for that. The doctor wouldn't let her speak a word.

Levering went on. "I had the doctor and Jim and Blackie standing guard on you in shifts," he said, "but Haines pulled you out from under our guard. He had his own plans for protecting you. I'd hoped this guard of ours would keep you safe, and meanwhile I sought to take pressure off the killer by keeping it dark that we knew that Mrs. Gadsden had been murdered. You see, there was the other string to my bow. My check with New York could have been unproductive and I was hoping to trap our man into giving himself away."

"And I," said Haines, taking it up, "was sent up here because we didn't like the look of your loss claim. After you'd recovered your watch, I didn't like it any better. You must excuse me, Miss Clinton, but you do carry a lot of insurance with us and you were beginning to look like a bad risk. I wanted to know about that. Then yesterday it became obvious that Mr. Brewster was right. You were a bad risk, but not on burglary insurance—on life. I tried to do what I could. I should have gone to Levering, but I had some foolish ideas about country cops and he did too good a job of playing dumb. He fooled me like I never thought I could be fooled."

"The luckiest thing," Dr. Blandy contributed, answering the unspoken question Hortense had promised to ask as soon as she would be allowed to speak, "was that he dragged you into the laundry chute before he started strangling you. You were breathing hard in there and that chute is a natural amplifier. The sound just roared through the upstairs hall and it brought Jim and me running, just as fast as we could possibly come running."

Levering bent over her. "The boys tell me you said you could identify a shoe print," he said. "Don't talk. Just nod if this is the shoe you can identify."

She waited while Blackie and Jim held Gregg Atterbury down and Haines pulled off one of Atterbury's shoes. Levering showed it to her. The rubber heel showed the chevron pattern.

Hortense nodded.

She didn't try to speak, but she did think. She put the whole thing in order in her mind. She would be ready for poor Mrs. Gadsden's inquest

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and she would be ready to meet young Lawrence Kingsley's eyes. She had it all now. Atterbury had been the Kingsley employee threatened with jail. He had persuaded Maud to bring him to her party. He had pretended to be ill at her party and, instead of going out to the bathroom, had gone through the kitchen to the service hall where he had pulled the fuses. Then he had gone into Everett Kingsley's apartment and killed the old man. He had come back and he had looked sick, but even Gregg Atterbury would look a little green after he had killed a man. The clock in the kitchen had been stopped all the time he'd been gone and the refrigerator had been defrosting. When he had come back he had discovered that he'd pulled one fuse too many and he had put it back, leaving the fuse box open.

There had been lights in her kitchen when she had gone out there later on.

It had been right after he had come back, ostensibly after being ill, that her guests had left. He had seen Maud home and had come back to search the Kingsley apartment for those records he had to destroy. His pretense of being ill had given him almost enough time for everything he'd had to do in the Kingsley apartment, but not quite enough time for the completion of his search. He had not dared stay out too long, lest one of the other men go to the bathroom to see whether he needed assistance. He had dropped his search then and had returned to the party. Then, after taking Maud home, he had gone back to the Kingsley apartment and had found the papers he'd had to have. For that there had been ample time.

He had simply turned up the papers immediately on the resumption of his search.

He had come back in the service hall when he was leaving after that job of work. He had taken her watch for the reasons she had guessed before, and the next day he realized that the kitchen clock gave him a better alibi than he had hoped for, the alibi of his presence at Hortense's party. He had only to put the kitchen clock forward to the correct time before Hortense returned from the hospital. A Kingsley employee had been in the Kingsley apartment with the police. That would be Atterbury. Hortense's maid had left the apartment door ajar all day. Atterbury could easily have slipped out and fixed the latch. Then when the maid had gone to bring Hortense's things to the hospital, he had slipped into her apartment, gone to the kitchen, and stood on the chair to fix the clock.

He hadn't had Hortense's watch with him then. It would have been

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too dangerous to carry it about, and after that he'd had no opportunity to slip it back to her and it had troubled him that the watch was the one item that spoiled an open-and-shut case against young Kingsley. He had come up to the Lodge and had dropped the watch in her closet, but she had seen through that and he knew he had made a fresh mistake. He had focused her thinking on watches and on time, and he was afraid of the moment when she would remember the electric clock in the kitchen. That had started the attempts on her life.

Hortense smiled.

"I can't talk," she thought. "I can't tell them how much of a case they have. They know I know something. I've planted that in their minds all right. They'll have to wait for the rest till tomorrow when I can talk again." She remembered the jive chatter she had been using with Blackie and Jim and, even though it hurt her throat, she chuckled with pure happiness.

"They've planted me now," she thought, "and that's quite all right. It can wait. They'll dig me later."

THE END

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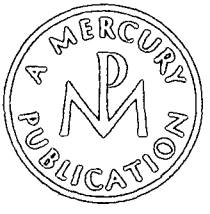
DIG ME LATER

Offhand, there is nothing particularly menacing about a pair of legs in dress trousers and evening shoes. Hortense Clinton certainly didn't think so when she saw such a pair as she was stooping down to put the milk bottles outside the door of her New York apartment. When she woke up in the hospital, her attitude was changed. For her head had acquired a painful lump, her valuable wristwatch had been stolen, and, to make the outrage complete, her neighbor across the hall had been murdered! This was too much, and, as soon as possible, Hortense went elsewhere, as far away as Nova Scotia. There she was just beginning to regain her normal calm, when one day her watch mysteriously reappeared! Soon after, with unidentified help, she almost drowned—and realized abruptly that Nova Scotia was not nearly far enough. . . .



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